

Biggles

DOES SOME HOMEWORK

The final, unfinished novel

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS

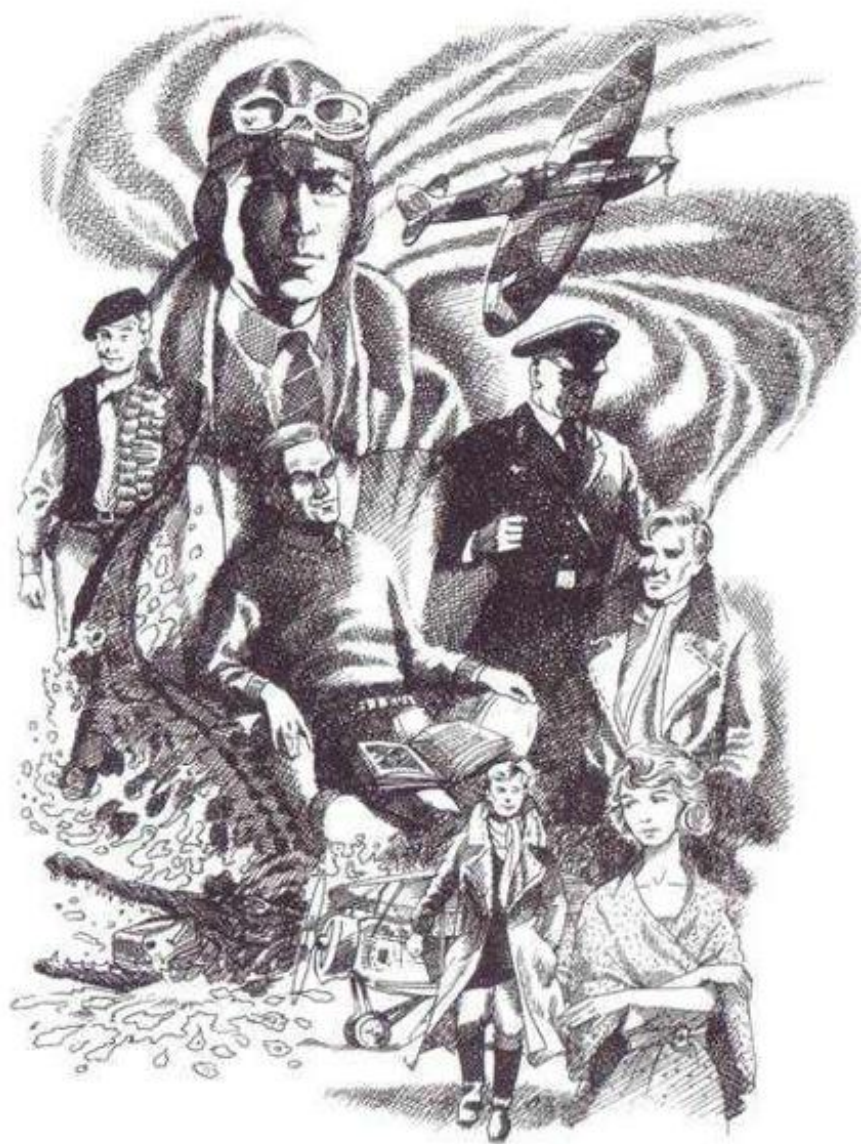


ANDREW DOLLETT '87

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Biggles Does Some Homework
Captain W. E. Johns



Introduction

When this book was first published, close on ten years ago, I little realised the demand there would be for copies. Enthusiasts in every corner of the globe were eager to add the final Biggles adventures to their collections and the print run of only 300 copies sold out within weeks.

Since then scarcely a week passes without someone asking if it would be possible to reprint the title.

It took several years to get permission for that first edition and it was given on the strict understanding that no further copies would be printed.

Since then the Limited Edition Series has grown apace and from time to time I have enquired of the agents who handle the W.E. Johns estate whether a reprint of “Biggles Does Some Homework” would be possible.

Unfortunately, since the publication of the first edition the option on all the Biggles titles has been with another publisher and I could not obtain a contract to reprint the story as a paperback.

The idea of a hard backed edition came to me recently and, with little hope that the answer would be in the affirmative, I once again sought permission. After some delay I was delighted to learn that such an edition would be sanctioned and without delay began work on this new volume.

To add a ‘little extra’ to this new edition I have included, in reduced facsimile form, the entire first chapter of the book in John’s own manuscript form. Reading that small, rather cramped handwriting is no easy task but it does demonstrate to the enthusiast how little re-writing Johns carried out.

The typesetting of both editions of “Biggles Does Some Homework” follows the fair copy typed up by Johns’ regular typist Mrs. S. Russell, a lady well used to deciphering Johns’ writing. Those of you with a few hours to spare might like to compare the finished text with Johns’ handwritten original to see if Mrs. Russell took any textual liberties!

Norman Wright 2007

Introduction to the 1998 First Edition

The 21st of June, 1968, began like any other working day in the life of the author, Captain W.E. Johns. He sat down at his desk at his usual early hour to continue writing his latest book about his airman hero, Biggles, and it was not until 8.30 a.m., when he was halfway through chapter twelve, that he decided to stop and make himself and his wife a cup of tea. It was while they were chatting together happily that tragically, without warning, he suddenly suffered a fatal heart-attack. The novel he had been working on, his final creation and last contribution to arguably the most remarkable juvenile fiction series ever written, was *Biggles Does Some Homework*. Until now, it has remained unpublished.

William Earl Johns' writing career began in 1922, with the publication of his first novel *Mossyface* in an issue of the *Weekly Telegraph Novel*. His output was both prolific and varied encompassing standard texts on aviation history and a vast volume of journalism, as well as a broad range of fictional works. He was founding editor of both *Popular Flying* and *Flying*, influential periodicals that helped to popularize aviation with a wide public during the 1930s. His stories of Biggles (RFC/RAF), Worrals (of the WAAF) and Gimlet (a Commando) encouraged recruitment to the services in the Second World War, and wartime articles for younger readers of both sexes appeared in the *Girls' Own Paper*, the *Boys' Own Paper*, and *The A.T.C. Gazette*. In the field of journalism it seemed that Johns could turn his hand to anything and while a large proportion of his articles were on aviation themes, he could with equal authority write on an almost infinite range of subjects from pirate gold to ghosts. He was a keen gardener and wrote a regular, long-running column for *My Garden* magazine.

Despite the breadth of his output it is for the creation of James Bigglesworth that W.E. Johns achieved worldwide fame. "Biggles" first saw the light of day in a short story entitled *The White Fokker* published in the inaugural issue of *Popular Flying* in April, 1932. Further stories followed and their rugged, gritty realism gained them a wide following amongst *Popular Flying* readership. It was not long before the editor of the story paper, *Modern Boy*, saw the character's potential for his younger readers and began reprinting the earlier stories, albeit with some slight textual changes. Biggles proved to be

as popular with boys as he was with their fathers and soon Johns was writing regular stories and serials featuring his airman for the weekly. The first Biggles book, *The Camels Are Coming*, was published by John Hamilton in August, 1932.

The firm published five further Biggles titles before the series was taken over by the Oxford University Press, who was themselves succeeded by other publishers, predominantly Hodder & Stoughton and Brockhampton Press. Girls as well as boys became devoted readers.

When Captain W.E. Johns died in 1968 he had stockpiled a number of manuscripts, and new Biggles titles continued to appear until 1970, when *Biggles Sees Too Much* was published. It bore the number '84' on its spine but in actual fact there were close on one hundred Biggles books published — not counting omnibus volumes. With so many stories already available and several completed tales to hand, it is perhaps not surprising that *Biggles Does Some Homework* was not published at the time.

Nevertheless, its absence from the canon has been a great loss to W. E. Johns enthusiasts, for as well as its unique value as the last work of a genius in the field of juvenile fiction, this novel is fascinating in its own right. The opening chapters spring some excellent surprises, and the way the question of Biggles' retirement is dealt with suggests that Johns intended the story to be the end of the saga. However, with this author, one can never be sure of anything until the final page!

It has long been the desire of admirers of W.E. Johns' work that *Biggles Does Some Homework* should be made available to collectors, and we are therefore, proud to present this first edition, strictly limited to 300 copies, of the final Biggles novel. The cover art and frontispiece are the work of Andrew Skilleter, a noted illustrator whose work can be seen on many video, spoken word cassette and CD sleeves, as well as frequently on best-selling paperbacks. When we were first involved in the project of publishing this volume, the late John Trendler, Biggles enthusiast par excellence, and a great friend, was one of the driving forces. He would have shared our delight at its publication, and we therefore respectfully dedicate this book to his memory.

Biggles Does Some Homework is presented here exactly as Johns wrote it, and in Appendix I we have included some pages of notes

that were found with the manuscript. As well as reminding us that the text as we have it has not been revised and finalised by the author, we feel that they give a unique insight into his method of composition. We lean over Johns' shoulder and watch him playing with different names for his characters, and joking at his own lack of decision: "Earlier B says to RAF man To start with, what's your name. Farley or Varley"! When he has written a tame passage, he jots down a firm "No", and starts to write a more exciting narrative. He also notes details he must insert into different chapters to make his story more colourful or plausible.

Appendices II and III are quite different from Appendix I. As the manuscript of the book ends in mid-sentence, which could be off-putting to even the keenest of Johns' readers, Appendix II consists of a suggested chapter synopsis for the rest of the story, and Appendix III adds a short passage of narrative that might possibly complete the book.

We hasten to emphasize that the text of *Biggles Does Some Homework* and the notes comprising Appendix I are one hundred per cent genuine W.E. Johns material, and that Appendices II and III are not his work.

Captain W.E. Johns created *Biggles* in 1932 and this, the final volume in the saga, is going to press sixty-five years later, in 1997. It seems an appropriate date to be preparing publication of the very last *Biggles* novel as sixty-five would almost certainly have been the retirement age for any real-life air-policeman. But we must remember, of course, that *Biggles* is an immortal character who will go on forever.

Norman Wright Jennifer Schofield 1998

Chapter One – A Heart to Heart

As soon as Biggles walked into his chiefs private office he knew from the expression on his face, and the way he held his hands with the finger tips together, that something unusual was afoot. “You wanted to see me, sir,” he prompted.

“I did,” confirmed Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Air Police Section at Scotland Yard. “This may take some little while so make yourself comfortable and help yourself to cigarettes. It’s time we had a heart to heart chat about things in general. You may not like what I’m going to say but don’t fly off at the handle until I’ve finished. Bear in mind that the subject I’ve been asked to raise is more embarrassing for me than it is for you.”

“I’m listening, sir,” Biggles answered, wondering what was coming. “Where have I slipped up?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. As far as I know you haven’t slipped anywhere.” The Air Commodore smiled reassuringly. “In fact, I think I can say that to certain important people you appear to be the blue-eyed boy.”

“That’s a relief, anyway,” sighed Biggles, reaching for a cigarette.

“Now let’s get down to business,” went on the Air Commodore briskly. “No doubt you will remember how and why this Air Police organisation came into existence. In case you don’t, because as things have worked out you have on occasion had to spread your wings a lot farther afield than was originally intended, I’ll remind you. When the war ended it was realised by the then Chief Commissioner here at Headquarters that with several thousand demobilised pilots out of a job some of them might try to get money the easy way. We should call it crime, although they, anxious to get their hands on a joystick again, might not look at it like that. So in case that happened — and as we know it did happen — it was resolved to form a force, or the nucleus of a force, of specialists in aviation to deal with the situation should it arise; men who understood the type of man war-flying produces. After all, flying only really started in the war, so the government looked like being faced with a state of affairs without precedent in history; one which the regular police might find difficult to handle. As things have turned out this was just as well.”

Biggles nodded. Still wondering what this was leading up to he

did not speak.

The Air Commodore resumed. "Well, as you know, as a pilot of experience myself, and one who had been on the Air Intelligence staff, I was called in for my opinion. I advised the formation of a small unit, one that could be enlarged if necessary, of men with the requisite qualifications, to be on hand to help the regular police with the technicalities of aviation if and when the need arose. My advice was accepted and I was asked to find the sort of men I had in mind. It was natural that the first person who came into my mind should be you. You had worked for me during the war, not only on normal combat tactics but what were called special missions, which demanded more than ordinary nerve, courage and intelligence, combined with a sense of responsibility. I put the proposition up to you and you came into the new service with the rank and pay of a police sergeant — plus, if I remember, four shillings a day flying money."

Biggles grinned. "I hope I earned that extra four bob a day. At the time I thought it was a bit mean and something of a come-down for an ex-Squadron Leader. But it wasn't the four bob that tempted me. The job offered possibilities — if you see what I mean, as Bertie Lissie would say."

"You were allowed certain privileges not enjoyed by the regular force," reminded the Air Commodore. Unsmilingly he went on. "You were allowed to choose your own assistant pilots, and I must say you deserve full marks for getting together a pretty good team, although at first I was a little doubtful about Lissie."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Frankly, I thought he was a bit of a twit."

"In what way?"

"This affected way he has of talking. The expressions he uses."

Biggles shook his head. "You didn't know him as well as I did. I judge a man not by the way he talks but what he does. That means when you've been in action together, words don't count when bullets are flying. Not only was Bertie an exceptional pilot and a cracking good shot, but I never, ever, saw him get ruffled or rattled. He never lost his head. He always came home cool, calm and collected. And usually smiling. Such a man is good for morale. In the old days I saw new pilots look at him wondering if he was quite all there; but when they'd seen him go to the rescue of a fellow in trouble they had

second thoughts.”

“Well, your judgment seems to have been right,” conceded the Air Commodore.

“Suppose we come to the point, sir,” suggested Biggles. “What’s all this leading up to?”

“We started this conversation by talking about what happened a long time ago. You’re still working with the same team. In view of , the advance in aviation, and the way things are going, it has been decided that the time has come to increase the size of the Air Section.”

“I see,” Biggles said slowly. “Aren’t we good enough?”

“I didn’t say that. It has never been in question.”

“What is, then?”

“Let me be frank with you. In the first place, as a result of a conference at high level at which I was present, it was resolved to expand the Air Branch. Again, you are not as young as you were – to put it nicely. That’s not your fault. No man can stay young forever. You need more help. Whether you like it or not the day is not far distant when you will be forced to retire. The question that will then arise is, who is going to take your place.”

Biggles smiled wanly. “Is this a polite way of giving me the sack?”

The Air Commodore made an impatient gesture. “Most certainly not. That’s the last thing the Chief Commissioner has in mind. Indeed, if he has his way you’ll be needed more than ever. The fact is, the experiment of a Special Air Section has been so successful that it has been resolved to increase its size while you’re still available to supervise its reorganisation. Money will be appropriated for new, more up-to-date, aircraft. Those you’ve been using have had a lot of wear.”

“They’re still reliable or I wouldn’t risk my neck in ‘em,” Biggles said grimly.

“There has also been talk of providing you with an airfield of your own,” went on the Air Commodore. “Air traffic is now such that it will soon be difficult for you to use a regular airport without worrying the air control officers.”

This Biggles admitted.

“There’s another point that shouldn’t be overlooked,” continued the Air Commodore. “It’s the usual practice, as well as a matter of

common sense, to have a replacement ready in case of an accident. The sort of work you do, by its very nature, presents hazards. Apart from your general health, which has never let you down, there is always the possibility of a mishap that could put you out of action. This applies to all of you. However capable and experienced a pilot may be the structural failure of some part of his machine is always on the cards. But it doesn't need me to tell you that. Call it an occupational risk."

"Don't remind me of it," protested Biggles.

The Air Commodore ignored the interruption. "It's only logical, therefore, that there should always be a spare man able to fill a gap should an emergency arise. I've been thinking about this for some time, but knowing you, and what your reaction to any change would be, I've allowed the matter to drift on. The question can't be put off any longer. The Chief Commissioner has mentioned it once or twice lately so I've had to brace myself to do something about it."

"I should be a fool to dispute it," murmured Biggles.

"Good. While we're on the subject, I may as well point out that I'm approaching retiring age myself; and I'd rather you took this from me, while I'm still in office, than from my successor." The Air Commodore sat back in his chair, fingers together, his eyes on Biggles' face for signs of approval or otherwise. "How do you feel about it?" he prompted.

Biggles drew on his cigarette before stubbing it in the ashtray. "I take your point, sir," he said without emotion. "It would be unreasonable for me not to. But as I've never given a thought to it myself this comes as a bit of a shock."

"Naturally. I can understand that. But the situation would be bound to arise sooner or later. But don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting you pack up right away. You've done a good job and it's appreciated in more than one government department, for which reason it is hoped you'll carry on for as long as possible if only in an advisory capacity. No man can go on flying indefinitely, and had your nerves not been tough they'd have cracked long ago. There's no need for any urgent reorganisation in your department. For the time being you can think it over. Take your time and come to me with any proposals that occur to you."

Biggles answered, dryly: "You've put the whole thing so clearly that there isn't much to think about. Obviously, the first and most

important thing is to start looking around for a suitable recruit.”

“I’ve already taken it upon myself to do that,” returned the Air Commodore with a hint of apology in his voice. “The final decision would of course be left to you,” he added quickly.

Biggles smiled bleakly. “You haven’t wasted any time. May I ask what you’ve done so far?”

“A week or two ago I happened to be dining with the Chief of the Air Staff and took the opportunity of asking him if he could find us a pilot most suited to our requirements; a candidate who might fancy becoming an air policeman. Of course, I could hardly expect him to release a serving officer, who in any case would no doubt wish to complete his time for pension. What I had in mind was an officer on a short service commission soon to be leaving on the expiration of his time. He did that. From the appropriate department he obtained, and sent to me, the names of a few pilots with exemplary records, soon to retire at the end of their contracts.”

“That was a good idea,” Biggles said. “We don’t want to start off by teaching someone how to fly an aeroplane. Nor do we want a type who isn’t amenable to discipline — my type of discipline, even though it may be a bit old-fashioned.”

The Air Commodore smiled. “I know what you mean. Well, the Air Ministry has sent me the names of some junior officers due for retirement with copies of their Confidential Reports.* (*Every year what is called a Confidential Report is made out in respect of every officer. This is submitted to the Higher Authority. It covers everything, his general conduct and whether or not he is recommended for promotion. The officer concerned knows all about this.)

I have been through these carefully and picked out one or two who struck me as being suitable. I didn’t want to bring them all here in a bunch for interview. I thought you’d prefer to see them one at a time in your office and make your own decision.”

“Thank you, sir. When can I expect the first candidate to come along?”

“I thought it would be a good thing to make a start on this particular exercise while you were not busy so I have one here now.”

The Air Commodore glanced at the clock. “Or he should be here. I told him ten o’ clock. It has turned that now, but as he has to come up from Wiltshire he may be a bit late.”

“If he is he starts off with a black mark,” Biggles said. “There’s no excuse for unpunctuality. He should know how long it takes to get to London from wherever he starts.”

“I’ll find out if he’s arrived.” The Air Commodore reached for the house telephone and put the question. “He’s here now, in the waiting room,” he reported, as he hung up.

“When shall I have him sent up to your office?”

“You’d better give me a minute or two to go through his documents and warn my lads about what goes on. I’ll go back to my room and give you a ring when I’m ready.”

“As you wish. Take his file with you.” The Air Commodore handed over a manila filing jacket with a wad of paper pinned in it. Biggles glanced at the name on the cover of the jacket. “Alexander Gordon Mackay,” he read aloud, his face creasing in a smile. “Sounds as if he might be a dyed in the wool Scot.”

“He is. From Inverness. As a matter of detail he’s a son of General Alexander Mackay V.C. , one time commanding officer of the Royal Scots.”

“Good. A man from a soldiering family can usually be relied on to start off on the right foot.” Biggles got up. “I’ll let you know as soon as I’m ready, sir. I shan’t be more than a few minutes.”

He left the room.

Chapter Two – Alexander Gordon Mackay

It did not take Biggles long to pass on to his staff pilots the gist of the conversation that had just taken place in the Air Commodore's office. Algy and Ginger listened in astonished silence. Bertie looked shocked, and in his indignation allowed his monocle to fall. However, he caught it expertly.

"Here, I say, chaps, they can't do that to you," he exploded wrathfully. "What a bally nerve after all you've done. It's an outrage, nothing less. If I knew the little inky-fingered pen-pusher who thought that up I'd knock his blithering block off."

"Whether they can do it or not they're doing it, so there's no point in getting steamed up about it," Biggles stated without emotion.

"We don't need extra hands," averred Ginger. "What's wrong with us? Aren't we good enough?"

"That isn't in question," Biggles answered. "It's simply that the Top Brass thinks there should be more of us. Let's face it, there's something in what they say. As things are, if for any reason one of us fell by the wayside we'd be short handed. Let's look on the bright side. With an extra body on the job we'd be able to take a spot of leave more often."

"After working our fingers to the bone for 'em I call it an insult," declared Bertie. "Mark my words, now we've got the show organised this is the thin end of the wedge to get rid of us, the ungrateful scallywags."

"If you've worked your fingers to the bone it was doing what you liked doing, so that's no argument," reminded Biggles.

"I vote we all go on strike. How about it? In this perishing country it's the only way to get things done — if you see what I mean." Bertie looked round for approval.

"You try that line of backchat, chum, and you're liable to find yourself struck off the payroll for good," remarked Biggles. "I must admit that when the chief sent for me this morning I wasn't expecting anything quite like this, so it kind of caught me on one foot. But you know the old saying: Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do and —"

"Kick the bucket," snorted Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. "You can kick what you like, but let's not waste time kicking against the pricks, bricks, or whatever it was

someone in the Bible tried kicking when he was dished out with something that didn't go down too well. It was soon evident to me that when the chief brought up the subject this morning the exercise had been cooking for some time. He'd been working on it, with the result that the first recruit is downstairs now, waiting for us to give him the once-over. It shouldn't take long to work out how well he's likely to fit into the party so let's get on with it. Leave the talking to me. All you have to do is tighten your safety belts should we look like getting out of control."

"What's the name of this bright lad who fancies his chance with a pair of handcuffs in his pocket?" inquired Bertie, breathing on his eyeglass and polishing it briskly.

"Alexander Gordon Mackay, Flying Officer R.A.F., shortly to swap his cap and goggles for a bowler hat," informed Biggles.

"Ha! A braw wee laddie from the bonny banks and braes, and what have you."

"He may be braw but I wouldn't bet on the wee," Biggles said. "A Scot I once knew, an Air Vice-Marshall, stood well over six feet in his socks. Not only had he the traditional red hair, but red whiskers sprouted out of his nose and ears. When he gave an order you jumped to it. The irks called him the devil on wheels."

"Why on wheels, old boy? I mean to say, what sort of wheels?"

"I wouldn't know. I was never told. Maybe undercarriage wheels, car wheels — take your choice."

"Well let's hope he has a sprig of white heather tucked in his bonnet. He'll need it if he mucks in with us — if you get my meaning."

"I'm more interested in what he's got under his bonnet," returned Biggles. "One never knows. The world is full of surprises. Before we do any more wild guessing let's have a look at him. Pull out a chair, Ginger, in case he swoons when he sees the flying coppers in full force." So saying he reached for the intercom telephone and informed the Air Commodore that he was ready to receive the applicant for the new post."

There was a moment or two of silence, then broken by the sound of footsteps approaching along the corridor outside. The door was thrust open and a duty officer announced: "Flying Officer Mackay, sir." He spoke in a curious voice and withdrew.

Alexander Gordon Mackay advanced into the office and saluted.

He was in R.A.F. uniform with pilot's wings on his breast. Under them was the red and white ribbon of the Air Force Cross.

A hush fell. No one spoke. Everyone was staring. Biggles had been prophetic when he remarked the world was full of surprises, for the man now standing before them bore no resemblance to the type that had been expected.

He was small and slight in stature. His features were finely cut, as if they had been intended for the opposite sex. His eyes were dark under black brows. His hair, as could be seen when he took off his cap, was straight, brushed well back and as black as the plumage of a crow. But what had probably taken everyone aback was the colour of his skin. It was the pale brown tint of heather honey.

The owner of this description was the first to speak. "Is something wrong?" he asked, looking around with a sudden expression of concern. Only by a slight intonation did he reveal that he had been brought up north of the Border. It was not the crisp manner of speech of Glasgow but the softer accent of the Highlands, where the general quiet makes it unnecessary to raise the voice in order to be heard.

"No, nothing," answered Biggles quickly. "We were expecting you. Take a pew. My name's Bigglesworth. I'm in charge here. These others are my staff pilots. I'll introduce them when the time comes. Don't think us rude, but to be honest and quite frank, in view of your name you don't exactly line up with what we had reason to expect."

Mackay sat down. "There's no need to apologise. I can imagine why. But if it's my complexion that worries you don't blame me. I have to thank my great-great-grandfather for that."

"Indeed! And how did that happen?" inquired Biggles, either for something to say or to ease the slight embarrassment in the atmosphere. "I thought you might have done a spell in the tropics and went out without a hat."

Mackay shook his head, perhaps a little sadly. "That isn't the answer," he said. "My colour goes deeper than sunburn. In fact, it's under the skin, in the blood. You see, one of my ancestors was a squaw man."

"A what!"

"You must know what that means. He married a Red Indian girl."

"I see," Biggles said slowly. "How interesting. No doubt he had a

reason.”

“He had. A good one. Of course, it happened a long time ago.”

“Just to satisfy my curiosity why did he do that? Weren’t there any white girls about?”

“Probably not. If there were apparently he preferred a red one. But that wasn’t the only reason. My noble ancestor was a soldier. To be specific he commanded a Scottish regiment under General Wolfe in his war in Canada. He was wounded. A local lass, daughter of an Indian chief, nursed him back to health. So he married her. It was as simple as that.”

“Jolly good,” murmured Bertie, softly.

Mackay ignored the interruption. “When the war was over he stayed on in Canada; but when his elder brother died, as he was sole heir to the family estates he came home to claim his inheritance. Naturally, he brought his wife and children with him. He must have thought a lot of her because he incorporated a tomahawk in the family crest. That’s the tale I was told as a kid, anyway. I suppose I had to be told to account for my unusual appearance. The Indian blood must be pretty strong for it to have persisted for so long. From time to time since that first generation it has cropped up. My father is white with red hair. My brothers and sisters are blondes. I happened to be one of the unlucky ones.”

“Why unlucky?” questioned Biggles. “I call that a fascinating story. It delights me to know there’s still some romance in a world that’s quickly going bonkers. I’d have thought you’d something to be proud of I’d be only too happy to have a Red Indian on my coat of arms — if I had a coat of arms.”

“It’s no joke having to go through life explaining how I got my coloured hide, particularly in these days of race and prejudice.”

“In my young days it would have meant something. You should have been in the Escadrille Lafayette and sported an Indian’s head, complete with eagle’s feathers, on your fuselage.”

“What was that?”

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

(Escadrille Lafayette was one of the most celebrated squadrons in France during the First World War. When the war broke out seven wealthy young Americans were in Paris having a good time. They offered to fight under the Flag of France, but the offer was declined for political reasons, America then being neutral. They found a way

round this by joining the Foreign Legion. Then one of them, Norman Prince, conceived the idea of an American flying unit. This they were able to do by buying their own planes and equipment. Germany objected to American civilians fighting against them, whereupon to give the squadron a French flavour it took the name Escadrille Lafayette. Its insignia, painted on the side of the fuselage, was the head of a Red Indian in war paint and feathered head dress. Prince was killed in 1916, and by March 1917 only one of the original seven was still alive. But the fallen were replaced by fresh young men from America seeking adventure and the squadron remained on the warpath.

Biggles went on. "I suppose in your squadron they called you Jock."

"No. Why should they?"

"Because it seems to be traditional in the British Armed Forces to call anyone named Mackay, Jock. In the same way a Murphy automatically becomes 'Spud' and a Miller, 'Dusty'. If they didn't call you Jock, since it's customary to give everyone a nickname, what did they call you?"

"Minnie."

"Why Minnie? Ah! I get it. Because you're a bit on the small side. This is the age of the mini — mini cars, miniskirts, mini everything."

Again the visitor shook his head sadly. "No, that wasn't it. When I was pushed to Flying Training School some silly ass shouted 'Here comes Minnehaha.' You'll have read Longfellow's poem, The Song of Hiawatha, so I needn't explain."

"As a schoolboy I read it as a holiday task but that was a long time ago," answered Biggles. "As far as I remember Hiawatha was a legendary chief of the Iroquois Indians."

"That's right."

"Then what has Minnehaha to do with it? I was under the impression that it had to do with water, a waterfall or something."

"It does. Laughing water. That's where the fool showed his ignorance. Apparently he thought Minnehaha was another Indian, or possibly Hiawatha's girlfriend. If so I thought it was in pretty poor taste. But it raised a laugh so he got away with his little joke. Unfortunately the name stuck, as nicknames will, and I became Minnehaha there and then; Minnie for short, and I had to suffer it.

Now I'm used to it, it no longer annoys me."

"The only sensible way to look at it," declared Biggles. "But never mind what they call you, let's get down to more serious matters. I take it you know why you were asked to come here?"

"I was asked by my C.O. if I'd care to join the Air Police and I said yes; anything for a quiet life and a joystick in my hand."

"You may not find it as quiet as all that," Biggles said dryly.

"Where are the Air Police?"

"Here. We're it."

"All of it?" Mackay looked surprised.

"The entire caboodle. What we lack in numbers we try to make up for in efficiency. Actually, we operate under the command of an Air Commodore who occupies the big chair downstairs. Having seen us do you still want to join the Air Police?"

"I see no reason to change my mind."

"Good. Then you won't mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"I'll do my best to answer them," Mackay said. "I assume there would be some aviating to be done from time to time?"

"Probably quite a lot."

"Jolly good. That's what I'm looking for. Do you carry guns?"

"What sort of guns?"

"Machine guns."

"For what purpose?"

"To shoot down crooks."

Biggles smiled faintly. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea. We're simply flying detectives. Which means we're able to move quickly to investigate anything unlawful in which aircraft may have been used. Our machines, mostly light planes, are not equipped with armament of any sort. On occasion, when there's dangerous work to be done, we may carry pistols in our pockets for use only in self-defence. This covers a pretty wide field and can take us all over the world. What would we do with machine guns? We could hardly dash around shooting down machines, possibly unarmed, even if we had reason to suspect something fishy. Don't worry. If it's danger you want we get plenty."

"Pity."

"What's a pity?"

"No shooting. I was hoping for a spot of air combat. I've had plenty of practice but never the real thing."

“I can’t promise to provide you with anything like that” Biggles grinned. “You’ll have to leave your scalping knife at home. Navigation is more likely to be of use to you than a tomahawk.”

“And no jets, then?”

“No. And we don’t want them. Quite often we have to make landings where there are no servicing facilities within hundreds of miles. We can’t carry concrete runways around with us. We’re equipped to do our own running repairs. If you fly with us you’ll learn something about do-it-yourself aviation.”

Mackay was looking a little disappointed.

Biggles went on. “If it’s blood you’re after one day you may see some of your own. Have you ever been shot at?”

“Too true — and hit.”

“How did that happen?”

“Grouse shooting. A careless idiot fired straight down the line of guns. I collected two pellets, one in the ear and the other in the thigh. An old gamekeeper dug them out with his pocket knife. Thought it was a joke. Said I’d been blooded.”

“Well, if you ever stop a heavy bullet you won’t think it’s a joke and you won’t try to dig it out with your penknife,” stated Biggles. “But this is no laughing matter,” he went on seriously. “What types have you been flying?”

“All types. Service types, of course. I’ve spent the last year at a communication squadron.”

“Which I imagine means heavy machines.”

“Not always. I’ve had to ferry some trainer types to the manufacturers for overhaul and reconditioning.”

“Fair enough. Did you bring your logbook with you?”

“Yes. Signed up-to-date by the squadron office.” Mackay took from his pocket and laid on the table the small regulation service logbook in which all flights are recorded.

Biggles opened it and perused the pages with a professional eye.

“This seems to be okay,” he observed. “Now let’s come to more personal matters. Why did you choose the Air Force? I understand your people have always been Army.”

“That’s right. But I had a fancy to fly and the Air Force was the only way I could do it. My old man wasn’t too happy about it because he’d hoped I’d carry on in the regiment we’ve always commanded. He was trained to do things the hard way — on your

own feet. To him flying isn't really soldiering."

"A lot of people have thought that but most of them have changed their minds when they've had a go at it. What do you like doing, apart from flying?"

"Fishing, shooting and rock climbing. At home I've had plenty of opportunities for all of them. I do one or two other things but nothing to shout about. For an indoor occupation I like reading, mostly military history, no doubt because most of our books in the library are on that subject. Great generals, and all that."

"Then you would appreciate discipline."

"If you'd had an old man like mine you'd have had plenty, whether you liked it or not."

Biggles nodded. "I can believe that. Now then. If you were accepted for this job the idea would be for you to come for a month on probation, as a cadet, to see how you shaped. If all went well you'd be confirmed as a police pilot for pay and allowances. How would that suit you?"

"Anything you say."

"When could you report for duty?"

"Any day. I still have another month to serve but I have a month's leave due so by taking that now I'd be free."

"Fine. But there's no rush. Leave me your home address and I'll get in touch as soon as a decision has been reached. That rests with the Air Commodore — on my recommendation."

"What do you think'?" asked Mackay, a trifle anxiously.

"It's too early to say. I'll let you know —"

"Don't you want to test me for flying?"

"Not now. That can be done later, should it be necessary, which it shouldn't, as for the moment your logbook tells me as much as I need to know."

"Right. In that case I'll get along."

"Goodbye for now, Mackay."

At the door the candidate looked back and smiled. "Just call me Minnie," he said. "It sounds less formal."

After he had gone Biggles reached for a cigarette and looked at the others. "Well, what did you make of him?"

"Seemed the right type to me," Algy said.

The others agreed. "A drop or two of Red Indian blood in the gang could warm things up — if you see what I mean," remarked

Bertie.

“In that case I’ll go down and tell the chief that as far as I’m concerned Mackay’s okay for a trial nm. There’s no point in bringing anyone else along yet. A crowd would only make the job of selecting one more difficult.”

Chapter Three – A Strange Tale of a Bag

Following the interview with the new prospective recruit events moved faster than Biggles had reason to expect.

He reported his impressions to the Air Commodore, expressing himself satisfied with the man he had produced. He did not think they could do better and proposed giving him a trial right away.

The Air Commodore agreed, saying he was all in favour of the build-up of the Air Section with the least possible delay. He invited Biggles to look around for a general-purpose aircraft most likely to suit their requirements. He himself was negotiating for the take-over of a new base convenient for London: Oakley aerodrome, recently evacuated by an American Air Force unit. There was all the accommodation they would be likely to need. There would have to be a resident caretaker. He would leave it to Biggles to find one, perhaps a retired N.C.O. who had at some time served under him. He would be enrolled as a constable in the Police Air Section. All of which was satisfactory although it did not mean Biggles was entirely happy with these new arrangements. He would have been content to leave things as they were. But as he told the others, this was the way of the world and they would have to keep pace with it.

At all events, a week later Police Air Cadet Mackay reported for duty, having found himself a temporary lodging not far from the office.

Now it had been Biggles' intention to take this introduction of a new member of the team slowly, in stages, the first step being to show him their aircraft, tell him about their methods and general police procedure, of which he knew practically nothing. This would also provide him with an opportunity to get to know them. But this did not work out as planned, the reason being that on the very day that Minnie — as they already called him — was due to report, Biggles was called to the Air Commodore's office and a case for investigation brought to his notice. This was before Minnie arrived.

"What's the trouble, sir?" asked Biggles when he went in.

"That's what I'm hoping you'll be able to tell me," answered the Air Commodore. He went on: "There might be nothing to it, at least as it would affect us. However, we've been asked to look into it. The matter was brought to light by the Surrey Constabulary, who apparently could make nothing of it and sent it here for the Yard to

sort out. It has finally arrived on my desk.”

The Air Commodore reached down to pick up an object that lay beside his chair. “The story won’t take long to tell,” he continued. “Last week a young man named Peter Ramsey, a schoolmaster in East Grinstead and an enthusiastic botanist, having time on his hands since the school was closed for the summer holiday, took a walk through the fields and woods between Newchapel Comer and Lingfield looking for some rare flowers said to occur there. Instead, he found this.”

The Air Commodore placed on the desk a large, light-coloured canvas bag, or sack. There were brass-bound loopholes round the neck through which a cord had been threaded to close the mouth when it was in use. On the side there was a jagged tear.

“That looks to me like a kitbag, the standard, regulation article issued to a soldier,” observed Biggles.

“That, in fact, is exactly what it is,” confirmed the Air Commodore.

“Then what’s the problem?” inquired Biggles. “It appears to be empty.”

“It is now, but it wasn’t when it was found. It was packed, and it was natural that the finder should open it to see what it contained. When he saw what it was, being a law-abiding citizen he fetched the police.”

“You’re keeping me in suspense,” complained Biggles, “What was in it?”

“It was packed with registered Post-Office mail. Stolen mail.”

“Had the bag been buried?”

“No. It lay quite openly on the ground under an oak tree, one of several that formed a small clump, call it a copse, or spinney, as if it had been casually thrown there. Presumably by someone who didn’t want it, since he didn’t bother to come back to collect it.”

“Why has the thing been passed to us?”

“To see if we can make anything of it, I suppose.”

“But this isn’t one of the heavy mail bags normally used by the Post-Office,” Biggles pointed out. “Of course it isn’t. And that poses two interesting questions. Firstly, why was the stolen mail transferred to this bag and why was it dumped in a wood in Surrey?”

“I hope you’re not asking me to guess,” Biggles said. “Tell me more, if there is any more to tell.”

“Quite a lot. We know that the bag had been lying there for a least a week because it had rained on it, although that hadn’t affected the contents. The letters and packets inside had not been opened. They were the fruits of a raid on a Post-Office van in North London. The driver was coshed. He is still in hospital in a serious condition. The Post-Office knows from its records of registered mail when and where the letters were posted. They have now been delivered. Why were they dumped and abandoned by the thieves? Doesn’t that strike you as strange?”

“Very. There must have been a reason.”

“Can you suggest one?”

“The crooks may have been after one particular packet which they knew was there, and having got it couldn’t dispose of the rest fast enough.”

The Air Commodore shook his head. “That to me doesn’t sound very convincing. It’s probable there was money in nearly every envelope or it wouldn’t have been registered. Money is always money, and crooks wouldn’t be likely to throw any away.”

Biggles lit a cigarette and considered the problem. “Was there one item of particular value in that load of mail?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“The counterfoils of the slips handed out to the public when a letter is registered are retained by the Post-Office. Every address has been checked, so it is known roughly how much money was involved, all told.”

“How much?”

“About five thousand pounds, some of it being payment for wins on the football pools.”

“You couldn’t know if one particular letter was missing?”

“Not yet. That would take time. A lot has been done, but so far nothing has provided a clue to the riddle.”

“Could gang warfare come into this? Were the thieves themselves robbed?”

“It doesn’t sound very likely. That wouldn’t explain why the loot should be transferred from one bag to another and then dumped without even the letters being opened. Besides, had the idea been simply to get rid of the stuff there are easier ways than dumping it in a wood. It could have been burnt on an ordinary house fire or sunk in

a river, or pond.”

“I imagine this bag has been thoroughly examined by the forensic experts!”

“Of course. It tells us nothing.”

“At one time it must have belonged to a soldier. I seem to recall that it’s usual for a soldier to put his name and regimental number on his kitbag for easy recognition.”

“There’s no trace of any such thing on this one. It appears to be a new bag.”

“Then how did it get torn?”

“That may have happened as it was dragged into the wood.”

This Biggles had to admit. “Are you asking me to try to sort out this little conundrum, sir?”

“I’d like you to have a shot at it.”

“That’s a pretty tall order. I’m not clairvoyant.”

“You’ve solved more difficult problems. This is at least an interesting one.”

“Very well, sir, if you say so. For a start I’d like to see the exact spot where this bag was found.”

“That can easily be arranged. The man who found the bag will now be back in the classroom at the end of the holiday, but I can ask for the constable who collected the bag to meet you somewhere handy — say, at the Star Inn, on the main road, not far away.”

“Do that, sir. Any time would suit me. This afternoon would do. Say, three o’clock. I’ll see what I can make of it but I don’t hold out much hope. May I take the bag?”

“Certainly, but don’t lose it. It may be needed.”

Carrying the bag Biggles left the room and returned to his own office where he found that the new member of the Air Section had arrived and was chatting cheerfully to the others.

Bertie eyed the kitbag with askance. “Hello, hello, what’s all this?” he questioned, adjusting his monocle. “Are we going camping or something?”

“It could happen, although I sincerely hope it won’t,” answered Biggles, putting the bag on his desk and turning to shake hands with the new recruit. “Welcome to our little fug-hutch,” he greeted. “You may have arrived at the right moment to try your apprentice hand at a little job that has just cropped up.”

“Goody-goody,” declared Minnie. “I’m flat out. Where and when

do we start?"

"At a wood in Surrey at three o'clock this afternoon, unless you're able to cover yourself with glory by doing a Sherlock Holmes act here and now."

"What's cooking?" asked Ginger, his eyes on the kit bag.

"The cooking has already been done," Biggles stated succinctly.

"What we have to find out is who did the cooking and for whom the r gravy was intended. Now, if you'll all pipe down and listen I'll tell you what was in the pot."

Biggles sat at his desk, lit a cigarette and narrated the tale of the bag as he had just heard it from the Air Commodore. Nobody spoke until he had finished. Then Minnie said in a puzzled voice: "I'm not quite with you, boss. What has this to do with flying?"

Biggles replied: "As far as I can see at the moment, nothing.

Absolutely nothing. But," he added, "as the wise man said, you never can tell."

"Then we're not aviating a flying machine to this wood in Surrey?"

"We are not. There would be no point in it, and in any case it's unlikely there'd be any place to put our wheels on the carpet. We shall go in an old but comfortable motor car I happen to possess, and as we're due to meet a copper of the county constabulary on or near the spot at three o'clock, I suggest we repair to a pub I know round the corner and wrap ourselves round a plate of steak and kidney pud."

"That's me all over," declared Bertie. "Just lead me to the trough, old boy."

As they filed through the door Minnie said softly to Biggles: "Does he always talk like that?"

"Usually," answered Biggles. "But take no notice. As you'll soon discover, it doesn't mean a thing."

"Are we all going on this jaunt to the Surrey countryside?" Algy wanted to know.

¢ "Unless anyone has any particular reason for staying at home the invitation is open to everyone," stated Biggles. "It'll take all the brains we can muster to sort this out. Between the lot of us someone might get a brainwave."

Chapter Four – Rural Reflections

At three o'clock precisely Biggles' car pulled up at the Star Inn on the main road between Newchapel and East Grinstead in the county of Surrey. A policeman, as arranged, was standing there, apparently waiting. They all got out, Biggles carrying the kitbag. He introduced himself "I think you must be the officer detailed to show us where this thing was found," he said, holding up the bag.

"That's right sir. P.C. Murray."

"Good. Have we far to go?"

"About a mile or a little more. Except for a stretch of cart track it's across the fields."

"Okay. You lead the way. I take it you've been to the place?"

"It was me who fetched the bag after Mr. Ramsey came to the station to tell us what he'd found."

"Did you see anybody about when you were there?"

"Not a soul. I wouldn't expect to. It isn't the sort of place anyone would go without a special reason. It's a nice quiet bit of country; proper rural, as you might say. Not a house anywhere near."

The party set off. As the constable had said, it was a quiet, pleasant stretch of country, a little of it cultivated farm land but mostly rough grazing. They cut through a fairly extensive wood, not of heavy timber but secondary growth of chestnut saplings where the original trees had been cut. The leaves were just taking on their early autumn tints filling the air with the fragrance of the season. On the far side of this was a wide area of coarse tussocky grass occupied by a stand of pewits which rose at their approach. Clearly, the place was seldom disturbed.

Pointing, the policeman said: "That's the place, straight in front of us."

The place he indicated was a circular group of trees, mostly oaks, covering perhaps a quarter of an acre of ground; isolated, it stood like an oasis in a green sea. It was, in fact, one of those copses or spinneys, now fast disappearing, established by Victorian landowners to provide cover for game, or, in hunting country, perhaps foxes.

As they walked up to it Biggles asked: "Isn't there any sort of road leading to this place?"

"No, sir."

"Not even a footpath?"

“Not that I know of.”

“Then how did the man who dumped the kitbag get here?”

“I reckon he must have walked across the fields,” surmised the constable. “I don’t see how he could have got here any other way. He must have wanted something to do.”

“Did you notice any footmarks when you first came here?”

“No. Only those made by Mr. Ramsey and me. I’ll admit I didn’t spend much time looking.”

Entering the spinney they stopped and looked around. All was quiet. Apart from the calls of various birds there wasn’t a sound.

Biggles said: “It certainly is quiet. What’s the nearest house?”

The constable thought for a moment. “I reckon it must be Lotton Hall, the big red brick place that stands back just this side of the crossroads. That’s the end of my beat.”

“I see. All I want you to do now is show us the actual spot where the bag was found; then we needn’t keep you any longer.”

“Just as you like, sir. I’ll walk as far as the end of my beat and look in on the way back in case you want anything.”

“As you wish.”

They walked on through a sea of bracken, just beginning to show its autumn tints, their feet rustling a carpet of dead leaves. The policeman stopped under an oak tree of some age. “This is the spot,” he said. “Mr. Ramsey said the bag was lying here amongst the ferns as if someone had thrown it down and forgot it.”

“Thank you, officer, that’s all I want to know,” Biggles said, whereupon the policeman touched his helmet and departed.

Biggles lit a cigarette, and looking pensively at the ground under the tree remarked: “What we’re going to make of this I can’t imagine. I don’t really know why I bothered to come here at all. Just a matter of routine, I suppose, to inspect the scene of the crime; although, of course, this isn’t where the crime was committed. Has anyone an idea? Don’t all speak at once.”

When nobody answered he went on. “All right. As no one seems to have had a rush of blood to the brain, since we are here we might as well do something. We can all look around for anything else that may have been left here; anything to give us a line on the sort of off-beat lunatic who would come to a place like this to dump a bagful of money: footprints, a cigarette end, maybe, or even a few shreds of fabric where the kitbag was torn.”

Some minutes were spent searching the ground in a widening circle round the tree. This produced nothing. Then Minnie said in a puzzled voice. "There's something wrong about this. I don't see how anyone could have got here, whichever way he came, without leaving a trail through the bracken. You can't walk through the bracken without leaving a mark. I know. I've tried it."

"The bag couldn't have put itself here, that's certain," returned Biggles, with faint sarcasm.

"Then it looks as if it must have dropped from the sky," stated Minnie, with a smile. Then the smile faded. "Why not?" he inquired.

Biggles looked up. "Why not what?"

"Why shouldn't it have dropped from the sky? If this fellow Ramsey is telling the truth the bag was found here. How did it get here? I've done some tracking, deer stalking in the Highlands, and I'm prepared to stake my reputation that no one could have got here, carrying a heavy bag, without leaving a mark. When I was a kid, not unnaturally, I was interested in Red Indian stories and tried to do the things they did so well. Tracking was one of them. That's my opinion, anyhow, for what it's worth."

For a moment or two Biggles did not answer. He was looking hard at the speaker. Then he said, slowly: "You know, laddie, you may have got something there. Come to think of it, why should anyone carrying a load of money come to a place like this merely to dump it? When you spoke about the bag dropping from the sky you may not have meant it seriously. But it could have been jettisoned by an aircraft. But why? Why, having been to the trouble to pinch the mail and load it on a plane, why chuck it overboard?"

Algy shook his head. "Don't ask me."

Ginger spoke. "If it was dropped from the sky, considering where it was found it must have fallen through the tree."

Bertie came in. "You know, chaps, if it did come through the bally tree it'd be a miracle if it didn't hit a branch on the way — if you follow me."

Ginger came back. "Of course, the bag may not have been slung overboard. It may have fallen out by accident. But there is this about it. If it was thrown out deliberately it strikes me that this isolated clump of trees, standing in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, would be a good place to park the bag if it was intended to recover it later."

"But it wasn't recovered," argued Biggles. "Why not? Why did

no one come along to retrieve it? Obviously, no one did come or the bag wouldn't have been here for Mr. Ramsey to find. It would have gone."

"Maybe the bloke who dropped it couldn't find the place when he went to look for it," offered Bertie. "There could be other woods, spinneys, copses or what have you, not far away."

"That knocks on the head the theory of this particular spinney being a conspicuous mark," Biggles said. "What was the bag doing on a plane, anyway?"

"If you're asking me, old boy, I'd say it was on its way to a safe hideout, possibly abroad. It might have been dark at the time, in which case it would be easy for the crooks to make a boob."

Biggles lit another cigarette. "We're doing a lot of talking. If we go on we shall end by convincing ourselves that the bag did fall from the sky; that an aircraft does come into the picture. How are we going to prove it?"

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Minnie said. "The bag must have been fairly heavy. If it bounced on a branch it should have made a mark. Possibly that was how the bag got torn."

"Are you any good at climbing trees?" asked Biggles, Minnie grinned. "I have been known to climb one."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind shinning up this one to see what you can find?"

"Fair enough, chief Watch me."

"Never mind the chief. You'd better call me Biggles, like the others, to save possible misunderstandings."

"As you say." Minnie went to the tree. Ginger gave him a leg up to the first branch and he disappeared into the leafy foliage.

The others waited as he continued to climb, with occasional pauses, from branch to branch. A few minutes passed. Leaves and small twigs floated down. Then Minnie reappeared, somewhat breathless and dishevelled. He hung on to the lowest branch with both hands, so it looked as if he had discovered nothing, before he dropped the final few feet. Picking himself up he produced something from a pocket and held it out for everyone to see.

"We were right on the beam," he announced triumphantly. "The bag bounced through the tree, I found this on the top branch where it first struck and was damaged. Take a look at this!" What he held was a shred of torn fabric; little more than a few strands of cotton of the

same colour as the kitbag.

“Great work!” congratulated Biggles. “That answers one question. The bag was dropped here from topsides. But that raises another riddle. I can understand the raiders trying to make a quick getaway by air; but, why in the name of all that’s fantastic did they chuck the swag overboard? It must have been in an aircraft? It couldn’t have got in the air any other way. What plane? Where did it go? Where is it now?”

In the silence that followed, with everyone contemplating the problem, from somewhere not far away a cock pheasant rose with its usual cackle of alarm and a frenzied flapping of wings.

Frowning, Biggles looked quickly in the direction of the sound.

“Someone flushed that bird,” he said tersely. “Don’t say we’re not alone in the wood.”

Might have been a fox put it up,” suggested Ginger.

“No,” stated Bertie. “Had it been a fox it would have flown into the nearest tree where it knew it’d be safe.”

Minnie came in. “It must have been the man I saw when I was at the top of the tree.”

Biggles started. “What man?”

“How would I know what man?” retorted Minnie. “When I was up the tree I noticed a man coming this way across the fields from the direction of the main road.”

“Why the devil didn’t you say so?” snapped Biggles.

“Does it matter?”

“It could matter a lot,” muttered Biggles. “There can’t be many reasons why a man should come here but I can think of one of ‘em.”

“You mean he might be looking for the bag?”

“What else? How was this fellow dressed? Like a farmer?”

“No. I didn’t pay much attention but he seemed to be wearing an ordinary town suit.”

Biggles whipped up the bag, which was still lying on the ground, rolled it up and pushed it into a nearby holly bush. “Don’t move, anyone,” he ordered shortly. “If he should come this way just behave naturally and leave any talking to me.”

Then, as they stood there, tense and expectant, there came the sound of advancing footsteps crushing dry leaves underfoot. For a while they appeared to wander about but the general direction was towards the middle of the copse where the party stood.

“Might be a gamekeeper,” breathed Algy.

“Whoever he is he’s looking for something,” said Biggles, softly.

“Keep quiet. He may not see us.”

If this was what he hoped he must have been disappointed, for a moment later some bushes parted and the man stood before them. He came to an abrupt halt, eyes wide with astonishment, and appeared to be at a loss for words.

He was a smallish, sharp-featured man, well dressed in a dark town suit, making it evident that he was neither a farmer nor a gamekeeper. Indeed, to Ginger’s way of thinking he was a little too well dressed. The toes of the fancy suede shoes he wore were too pointed. His tie, in R.A.F. colours, was pulled into too tight a knot, and was held thus with what appeared to be a pearl tiepin. A “Pork pie” hat was set at a jaunty angle on his head and sported a suit of highly-coloured feathers. In short, he looked entirely out of place for where he was. However, he was the first to speak.

“Hello there,” he said with a smile, obviously forced, and possibly intended to be reassuring. “What are you chaps doing? Playing some sort of game?”

Chapter Five

“Not exactly a game,” Biggles answered evenly, “We had a reason for coming. May I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Sorry if I’m trespassing,” was the reply. “Do you happen to own this ground?”

“No,” Biggles said. “It’s nothing to do with me.”

“Matter of fact I was looking for something,” explained the new arrival. “Have you been here long?”

“A few minutes.”

“I suppose you don’t happen to have seen a bag lying about?”

“What sort of bag?”

“Actually, an old army kit bag.”

“What would such a bag be doing here?”

The man hesitated but rose to the occasion, revealing he was quick-witted. “I came here the other day with some friends for a picnic. We brought the bag to carry the food and equipment. When we left we forgot to take it with us. I thought I’d come back to collect it. So far I haven’t been able to find it.”

“Then I may be able to help you,” said Biggles calmly, to the surprise of everyone in his party. “I did see such a bag as the one you describe. Not liking to see litter lying about I shoved it under that bush.” He pointed to the holly shrub.

“Thanks,” acknowledged the man, moving quickly towards the place indicated.

“You must set some particular value on it,” suggested Biggles. “I mean, to take the trouble to come to fetch it.”

“I do. It’s an old travelling companion of mine,” the man said fluently.

“Really. You surprise me,” returned Biggles. “It looked like a brand new bag to me.”

“I had it cleaned only the other day.”

The man found the bag and dragging it out threw it on the ground at his feet. There he stared at it with an extraordinary expression on his face, as if he found it difficult to believe what he saw. He also appeared to have difficulty in speaking. Then he blurted: “Was the bag like this when you found it?”

“There was nothing in it when I first saw it, if that’s what you mean.”

“Are you sure it was empty when you threw it in the bush?”

“Absolutely certain.”

“Where did you pick it up?”

“Here, under this tree.”

“You didn’t find anything else lying around?”

“Such as?”

“Well, letters, for instance.”

“You’re sure you don’t mean teacups?”

“Why should there be teacups?”

“I thought you said the bag was used to carry picnic things.”

“So I did. But there may have been some letters, or papers, as well.”

Biggles shrugged. “Well, I certainly haven’t seen any letters, or other sort of papers,” he declared. “If I had I’d have burnt them.”

For half a minute the man looked at Biggles suspiciously.

Biggles said. “Were the letters important?”

“They might have been.”

“If I find any would you like me to post them for you,” suggested Biggles.

“No. Forget it.” With that the man turned away, and leaving the bag as it lay, strode off, presently to disappear in the undergrowth.

As soon as he was out of sight Biggles moved swiftly to Minnie.

“After him,” he whispered tersely. “This is where you can practise your Red Indian stuff. See where he goes and if he meets anybody. There may be several of them. They could have a car on the road. If so try to get its number but for goodness sake don’t let yourself be seen.”

“I’ll watch it,” Minnie said crisply, and faded away in the direction the man had taken.

For a little while nobody spoke. Then Ginger said: “Why on earth did you tell him we’d found the bag?”

“I wanted to see his expression when he discovered it was empty. He wasn’t a very good actor and he wasn’t a clever liar. Now he’s got a problem on his mind. What has become of the registered mail which he knew perfectly well was in the bag when he last handled it.”

“You think he was one of the gang involved in the raid?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“Then why did you let him go?”

“What else could I have done?”

“You could have arrested him.”

“For what? Suspicion isn’t proof. Everything he said and did, and the fact that he was here at all, points to him being concerned with it the theft of the mail; but we haven’t a scrap of concrete evidence that would stand up in court. I had to think quickly and I decided it would be better to let him go in the hope that he would lead us to the rest of the gang. The fellow who came here wasn’t alone in the raid. There were others.”

“Then why did he come here alone?”

“I wouldn’t know. Maybe he was the only one who knew exactly where the bag was dropped. He came here to recover it. Of that there’s no doubt whatever. It gave him a shock to find us here but there was nothing he could do about it without giving himself away. He must have left here completely foxed, but when he’s had time to think he may hit on the truth. If he decides we were really here by accident he may come back to look for signs of the letters which should have been in the bag.”

“You noticed he wore an R.A.F. tie?”

“Of course.”

“What do you take that to mean?”

“The probability is he was once in the Service. Which means he could be a pilot. If so he may have been taken on by the crooks to fly the stolen mail somewhere.”

“Why did he dump it here, old boy? Tell me that,” requested Bertie.

“If it comes to that, why did he drop it at all,” put in Algy.

“I wish you wouldn’t ask questions impossible to answer,” protested Biggles. “We might make a hundred guesses and be wrong every time. All we can do now is wait for Minnie to come back. He may have gathered information that could throw light on the mystery.”

“The robbery took place over a week ago,” Ginger said thoughtfully. “Why have they waited until now to try to find the bag?”

“We don’t know that they have waited until now. The crooks may have been searching for days. They didn’t find it for the simple reason it wasn’t here. It had already been found by this schoolmaster fellow, Ramsey, who, by bad luck for the crooks, happened to be on

holiday and chose this place to look for wild flowers. But that's how things go in this world. You know the old saying about the best laid plans coming unstuck. Somehow, we don't know how exactly, that must have happened here."

Nothing more was said. They stood in a little group, waiting, watching for Minnie to return.

"He's a long time," muttered Algy impatiently.

"He may have had some distance to go," Biggles said shortly. "Don't worry. He'll come back here when he's ready."

Hardly had the words left his lips when from some way off, in the direction Minnie had taken, there came a sharp report of a firearm.

Biggles' face lost some of its colour. "My God!" he breathed. "I don't like that. That was a pistol shot. I hope it wasn't fired at Minnie. He couldn't have fired it because he didn't carry a gun, unless he did so against orders."

"He wouldn't do a thing like that," asserted Bertie.

"What are we standing here for?" demanded Ginger. "Hadn't we better be doing something?"

"What, for instance?"

"Go and look for him."

Biggles hesitated. "When in doubt do nothing in a hurry. We might do more harm than good. I couldn't swear to where the shot was fired so there'd be a lot of ground to cover. If we go and he comes back here he'll wonder what has become of us. We'll give him a couple of minutes. If he isn't here by then we shall have to try to find him, that's all there is to it."

"Hark!" rapped out Ginger. "I can hear someone coming now."

"Coming in a hurry, too, by the sound of it," Bertie said, as footsteps pounded through the dead leaves and bushes were thrust aside.

"It may not be him," Biggles snapped. "Stand fast. This may mean trouble." Then he drew a deep breath of relief as Minnie, flushed of face and breathing heavily, burst from the nearest bushes.

"I'm glad to see you on your feet," greeted Biggles. "All right, take it easy. We heard a shot. Was it tired at you?"

"No," panted Minnie. "At the fellow who came here. They got him, too. I dashed back to let you know."

"Tell us exactly what happened," requested Biggles. "Just the facts. Get your breath back then take your time. There's no hurry

now we know you're safe."

Minnie told his story. "When I reached the edge of the wood I saw him cutting across a big grass field towards a tall, thick-set hedge which, judging from the telegraph poles running at right angles I took to be on the side of a main road. As soon as he was out of sight I sprinted after him, keeping, of course, on the other side of the hedge."

"You're sure he didn't see you?" put in Biggles.

"Positive. The hedge was thick and I was some distance behind."

"Okay. Carry on."

"You were right about him having a car," continued Minnie. "In fact, when I reached the road I saw there were two cars parked close together. One looked like an ordinary London taxi. There were two men standing beside it. I thought they were merely waiting for the fellow who came here to come back. I was right — more or less."

"How far were you from the cars?"

"About a hundred yards when I hit the road; but that was close enough for me to see what happened when our man joined the other two. I don't think he knew the others were there until he climbed through the hedge. He made for what I think must have been his own car, which he had left there to come across to the spinney. It looked like a Cortina. He tried to get into it but the other two wouldn't let him. They grabbed him, whereupon there broke out what looked like a first-class row."

"Could you hear what it was about?" inquired Biggles.

"Not the actual words; so I moved nearer, keeping of course on my own side of the hedge. Then there was a shot. I didn't see it fired, but I heard it. When I got to a place where I could get a peep the fellow who came here was on the ground. One of the men with the taxi had a gun in his hand. He was looking at the man on the ground. The other appeared to be arguing with him but I still couldn't hear what he said."

"You assumed the chap on the ground had been shot."

"Naturally."

"Did you get a good look at the other two?"

"Yes. But I was still some little distance away so I couldn't swear to recognise them again. All I can say is they were young, and looked like two ordinary fellows such as you might see anywhere. Both had long hair. One had side whiskers — you know, mutton chops I think

they call them. I was just going to move a bit nearer when things happened with a rush. The two men picked up the man on the ground and bundled him into the backseat of the taxi. I soon saw why. A sand lorry came along. It didn't stop. As soon as it had I gone past one of the men got into the taxi and drove off. Then the other followed him in the Cortina. That's all. There was nothing more I could do so I dashed back here to let you know what had happened."

"Did you get the number of either of these cars?" asked Biggles.

"Only the first three letters of the Cortina. The rest of the plate was hidden by the taxi being in the way."

"In which case, surely, you could have seen the number of the taxi."

"Yes, had it been clean. But it wasn't. It was plastered with mud. The letters of the Cortina were YXB."

"What colour was it?"

"From where I stood it looked like dark blue, or possibly black."

"Pity it wasn't a two colour job. It would have been easier to recognise if we saw it again. Never mind. Well done, Minnie. You did everything possible. You were right not to take risks."

"Thanks. What do you make of it?"

"It begins to add up," replied Biggles thoughtfully. "I may be wrong, but as I see things now what happened this afternoon was this. The fellow who came here was either one of the gang or he'd been hired to fly the swag somewhere. That he wore an R.A.F. tie doesn't necessarily mean he's a pilot. But he could be. His job could have been to take the swag to some pre-arranged place. Instead, for some reason he dropped it here. One thing we do know for certain is that it was dropped here."

Bertie put in a word. "Maybe he double-crossed the gang by dropping the stuff here intending to get the lot for himself."

"You make a good point," conceded Biggles. "That would account for the delay, the length of time the bag was left lying here. That he came here this afternoon hoping to collect it is beyond any shadow of doubt. Of course, he may have been here before and failed to find the bag. The others, who must have been suspicious of him, were keeping an eye on him. They must have known his car. When they found it standing by the roadside they'd guess what was going on. There was no need for them to look for him. All they had to do was wait for him to come back, no doubt hoping he'd have the loot

with him. As we know, he hadn't got it. What tale he told to explain what he was doing we don't know, but apparently the others didn't believe him. That was when the argument started. It ended by one of 'em pulling a gun. We must remember they go armed. Tell me this, Minnie. The man who was shot. Do you think he was killed?"

Minnie shook his head. "I can't answer that. Obviously he was hurt pretty badly or he wouldn't have been on the ground. He looked pretty limp to me when they stowed him in the taxi. But if he was dead why should they take the body away with them?"

"They'd have more sense than to leave a dead man, a man who had been murdered, lying by the roadside where the body would be seen by the first person to come along. That would have started something. They wouldn't want that to happen, you may be sure. Somebody may have seen the cars at the spot. That lorry driver, for instance. He'd remember them when the police started making inquiries. Every vehicle using that road regularly would be checked. Of course, the man who was shot may not have been killed, so the men who took him away may still be hoping to get the truth out of him."

"He may have told them the truth; that he'd found the bag and there was nothing in it," conjectured Algy.

"Do you suppose they'd believe such a tale? Not likely. They'd know there must have been a lot of lolly in that bag and they'd want to get their hands on it."

"Too true, old boy," agreed Bertie. "So where do we go from here?"

"As things stand at the moment I don't feel like going anywhere," Biggles answered. "This is as good a place to be as anywhere."

"How do you work that out?"

"Put yourself in the position of the crooks. It's obvious they want the money and are prepared to go to some trouble to get it; even as far as murder. Now let's try a little reasonable speculation. They follow the car of the man who came here. They find it standing on the road. Minnie, what in the circumstances would you expect them to do?"

"Look around for the driver?"

"Right. Not knowing which way he'd gone they'd watch for him to come back, knowing he couldn't be far away and that sooner or later he'd come back to his car."

“That’s what one would expect,” agreed Minnie.

“So that if they kept their eyes open they’d see him come out of this coppice.”

Again Minnie agreed.

“And when he arrived back at the car without either the bag or the money what would they think?”

“That either he’d been unable to find the bag, or if he had, he’d hidden it somewhere.”

“Good. We’re making progress. What would be the next thing they’d be most likely to do?”

“Come here to look for it.”

“Good again. Now you see what I’m driving at; why I think it would be a good thing to stick around here, for a little while, anyway.”

“But they went off in the car,” reminded Ginger. “Minnie saw them go.”

“For a good reason. They had a body to dispose of. But that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t come back when they’d done that and had time to think things over.”

“What could you do if they came?” asked Minnie.

“To start with we’d have a close look at them. If they’re in our records we might be able to identify them. Failing that we could get the number of their car, and that would be something to go on with.”

“I get it,” put in Bertie. “So all we have to do is wait here for these rats to roll up.”

“That’s the idea, unless anyone can think of a better one,” Biggles said. “But if we don’t want to be caught at our own game we’d better post watchers on the edge of the spinney so that we’ll know they’ve arrived. Ginger, you and Minnie can do that. Two should be enough. The chances are they’ll come from the nearest point they can reach in a car. Which means where they stopped before, on the main road. Okay. Get cracking. We’ll wait here.”

Ginger and Minnie set off.

“This’ll be a spot of practice for Minnie, if nothing else,” remarked Biggles to the others, as he lit a cigarette.

Chapter Six

How seriously Biggles had entertained the thought, that the men who had shot their recent visitor would return, we don't know; but he certainly looked surprised when, within a few minutes, Minnie came back, bursting through the bushes in his haste, with the announcement "They're coming now!"

"Are you sure they're the same two men?" asked Biggles, getting up from the kitbag on which he had been sitting.

"They look like the same two to me."

"How far away are they now?"

"They're nearly here."

"You're sure they're coming here?"

"They're on a direct course."

"Coming from the direction of the road?"

"Yes."

"Then all I can say is they couldn't have gone far with the man they shot," Biggles said. "Where's Ginger?"

"He's gone off behind the hedge to find their car and get its number. He sent me back to let you know what's going on. He said you wouldn't need him here."

"Fair enough."

Algy spoke. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"Stay where we are. What else?"

"They'll see us."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"They'll spot we've got the kitbag. That's what they'll be after."

"So what? What of it?"

"They'll realise we must have found it."

"Good. That should induce them to talk, which suits me."

"They may turn nasty."

"All the better. The more they talk the more likely they are to give themselves away."

"You're not forgetting that one of 'em at least has a gun?"

"I wouldn't be likely to overlook that," retorted Biggles.

Minnie came in. "Remembering they've already shot one man aren't you taking a big risk?"

"Listen, laddie," returned Biggles evenly. "On this job we take risks all the time. We have to if we're to get anywhere. If you object

to sticking your neck out you know what you can do. You're still only on trial."

"I didn't say that," protested Minnie, looking hurt.

Biggles relented. He smiled. "Sorry. You were right. By playing this game my way we may be taking— a chance, but in dealing with small-time crooks I'm always ready to gamble my experience on how they're most likely to behave. They may talk tough, but when it comes to a showdown they get cold feet. That's why they're crooks. Battering an old man nearly to death with an iron bar, as this lot did to get their hands on the mailbag, is one thing. To take on more than they're sure they can manage easily is a different kettle of fish. There are four of us here. I can hear them barging about so it shouldn't be long before they bump into us."

"What are you hoping to get out of 'em, old boy?" asked Bertie.

"Nothing in particular. One thing I'd like to know, although it may be expecting too much, is where they've just been, because that's where they'll probably go when they leave here. If that's where they've taken the man they scuppered it can't be far away. I can't see them taking a body into London. They'll have him out of that car at the first opportunity. If Ginger finds their car he may be able to get a line on that. Okay. That's enough talking. They're getting close. Be careful what you say, if you have to speak at all. Just behave naturally." With that Biggles reseated himself on the kitbag and lit another cigarette.

A few minutes passed. Voices approached. Then from the nearest bushes two men emerged. What followed was almost a repetition of the earlier encounter. The men stopped. Their conversation died. The atmosphere suddenly became brittle.

To ease the tension Biggles said, cheerfully: "Nice day for a stroll in the country."

The two men, after a brief hesitation, walked slowly forward, allowing time for them to be considered in detail.

One was a small, thin-faced youngish man with the alert, nervous manner of a sparrow that has once been caught. He was dressed in a shabby blue serge suit shiny from wear. On his head was a felt hat with the brim snapped down in front. His brown shoes looked as if it was a long time since they had seen a brush. His companion, a rather older man, was a different type. He was heavily built with a broad face in which the eyes were far apart. He wore no hat, so it could be

seen that his hair had been what has become known as 'styled', in a long curl over a low forehead. Sideboards extended some way down the sides of his face. His nose had a kink in it, as if it had been broken and carelessly set. A 'cauliflower' ear suggested he might have been a professional boxer. He wore grey flannel trousers, baggy at the knees, and an old tweed sports jacket which had been left unbuttoned to expose a dirty pullover. Round his neck had been knotted a highly coloured handkerchief. He walked with his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets as if he didn't know what else to do with them.

As Bertie remarked softly to Biggles, they looked a good pair to keep well away from on a dark night.

To Biggles' greeting, which was civil enough, there was no reply.

Instead, pointing at the bag on which he was seated, the little man, speaking with a pronounced cockney accent, demanded: "Where the hell did you get that?"

"Get what?" asked Biggles, with feigned innocence.

"That bag you're a' sittin' on."

"Funny you should ask that," returned Biggles.

"What's funny about it?"

"You're the second man this afternoon to ask me the same question. Is there something special about it?"

The man ignored the question. He asked another. "Who else has been here?"

"Do you mean the man's name?"

"Course. What else."

"I haven't the remotest idea. I don't make a practice of asking strangers their names."

"What sort of cove was he?"

"I didn't pay much attention to him," replied Biggles carelessly.

The little man threw a sidelong glance at his companion before continuing. "What are you doing with the bag?"

"Sitting on it."

"I can see that, smart guy. Why?"

"Because the ground's damp and I don't want to get my bottom wet."

The little man glared. "Don't you try to get clever with me, mister. Gimme that bag."

"Why should I give it to you?"

“Cause it’s mine.”

“That’s what the other man said. I only have your word for it.”

“Ain’t that enough?”

“Frankly, no.”

Algy, watching all this, realised that Biggles was playing his favourite trick of trying to get his enemy rattled. And he appeared to be succeeding.

“What have you done with the stuff what was in the bag?” demanded the little man in a hard voice.

“Should there have been something in it?” countered Biggles calmly.

“Yes.”

“And you know what it was?”

“Course I know.”

“Then you have only to tell me what it was to prove your claim to the bag.”

The man’s scowl deepened. “Give it here.”

“Not till you’ve proved it’s yours.” Biggles went on. “You’ve been asking a lot of questions. What about me asking one or two for a change. You say the bag’s yours. Just as a matter of interest perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me how it got here?”

“I brought it.”

Biggles looked severe. “Somebody isn’t telling the truth.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“Either you or the man who came here earlier. He told me what was in the bag when he left it here by accident; or so he said.”

“What did he say was in it?”

“Some things that were brought here for a picnic.”

“He’s a liar.”

“What do you say was in the bag?”

“Why should I tell you?”

Biggles shrugged. “Please yourself.”

“What have you done with the stuff that was in the bag?”

“When I picked up this bag there was nothing in it. Isn’t that enough for you?”

“No.”

“What are you going to do about it?” inquired Biggles smoothly.

“Get off it and let me have a look at it.”

“There’s no name on it.”

“I know that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s mine, that’s how. How many times do you want telling.”

“From the way you’re behaving anyone would think the bag was I stuffed with gold bricks,” Biggles said, getting up. “Still, I don’t mind you having a look at it if you’ll give it back. I want it for a seat.”

The man picked up the bag and shook it, although its weight must have told him it was empty. “What ‘ave you done with the letters?” he rasped.

“What letters?”

“The letters what was in it.”

“Oh, so now it had some letters in it,” sneered Biggles. “Well, there were no letters, or anything else, in it, when I picked it up.”

“Where was it picked up?”

“Here, on this very spot.”

The big man spoke for the first time. “Looks like Bert might have been telling the truth,” he remarked in a deep gruff voice.

“I don’t believe it,” snapped the little man. “He knew damn well the bag was here, didn’t he?”

“So apparently did you,” murmured Biggles.

The little man spun round to face him. “Don’t give me any of your blasted lip,” he grated. “You’re keeping something up your sleeve,” he added venomously, revealing that he was not without intelligence. “You can’t kid me. Come on. Hand ‘em over.”

“Hand what over?”

“The letters what was in this bag.”

“I haven’t seen any letters and you’ll have to take my word for it,” stated Biggles. “Push off. I don’t know you and I don’t want to know you.”

“I’m taking your word for nothing, Mister Clever Dick,” was the harsh rejoinder. “I don’t know who the hell you are or what you’re a’doin’ here, but you can’t fool me. Now you can tell me what you’ve done with them letters, or else.” In a flash the man had an automatic pistol in his hand.

Biggles raised an eyebrow. “So that’s the sort of man you are. Has nobody told you it’s illegal to carry lethal weapons? The police will be interested to hear about this.”

The big man cut in. "Come off it, Joe. I've told you before, you're too damned handy with that thing. Get rid of it, or I'm not coming out with you again."

"Wise man," said Biggles. "It's going to get him into trouble one of these days."

The little man returned the gun to his pocket. "Well, you have a go at 'em," he told his companion with a sneer. "Try it your way."

The big man stepped up to Biggles, who was still on his feet with the bag lying where it had been thrown down.

"What do you think you're going to do?" inquired Biggles coldly, looking the man in the eyes.

"I'll show you." The man threw off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and bunched his knuckles.

Biggles realised what this implied. "You'd better think again," he warned. "Do you want to bring the policeman along? You'll be in trouble if I tell him you're carrying guns."

The big man hesitated, scowling. "Policeman? What policeman?"

"How would I know? I can only tell you there was one here when we arrived."

"What the hell would a copper be doing here?"

"Looking for poachers, maybe. You can ask him yourself if you see him. From the row you're making that shouldn't be long."

"Bah!" sneered the little man. "Don't give us that guff."

"I'm not giving you anything," returned Biggles coldly. "I'm simply telling you. As far as I'm concerned you can go to the devil."

"What are you supposed to be doing here, anyway?"

"That's my business. Why should I tell you? The policeman knows we're here."

"How does he know?"

"He saw us. In fact he spoke to us," Biggles said, hoping to gain time. And, it might also be said, hoping the policeman would come, as he had said he might, for the last thing he wanted was a stand-up fight.

"He's lying," spat the little man venomously. "I'm not swallowing that tale."

"Please yourself" Biggles said.

The big man seemed not so sure. Perhaps there was a confidence in the way Biggles spoke that put a doubt in his mind. He put on his jacket. "We'd best get out of this," he growled.

“Not me,” rasped the little man, again drawing his gun.

“You fire that and it will bring him along,” Biggles said, with a confidence he did not feel. Then, hearing footsteps approaching, he added: “This sounds like him coming now. You can argue the toss with him. You’d better put that gun out of sight.”

Following a swishing of bushes the police constable appeared. He stopped, looking at the assembled men in mild surprise. “What’s going on?” he asked sternly. “What’s all the fuss about?”

Biggles indicated the two strangers. “You’d better ask them,” he suggested.

The men did not wait to be questioned. “It’s nothing to do with us,” said the little man. “We were just out for a ramble when this lot started throwing their weight about,” and with that, with a sign to his companion, he turned and walked away.

The officer looked at Biggles with a puzzled expression.

“Everything all right, sir?” he asked.

“It is now, thanks,” answered Biggles.

“Are you coming along to your car?”

“Not yet,” Biggles said. “I shall have to wait here for one of my party but there’s no need for you to stay.”

“Then I’ll be on my way,” said the policeman. And with that he departed.

Said Algy, seriously, looking at Biggles. “He arrived just in time to save you being well and truly beaten up.”

“You don’t imagine I would have been so daft as to allow that to happen,” replied Biggles. “At a pinch I still had a trump card to play.”

“What was it?”

“I would have told him who I was. That would have pulled him up short. Fortunately the arrival of the gentleman in blue made it unnecessary. But this is no time to stand talking. Minnie, get after those two toughs to see if Ginger bumps into them. That could lead to more trouble. I’ve never seen a nastier-looking pair of villains.”

Minnie hurried off. The others waited. Minutes passed. Then Minnie reappeared. “Can’t see a sign of Ginger,” he reported.

“Did you see those two rascals?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to them?”

“They went straight to the road and made off in a car. I was the

wrong side of the hedge so I couldn't see it, but I heard it start."

"In that case Ginger shouldn't be long. We shall just have to wait for him, that's all." Biggles sat on the kitbag and lit a cigarette. "We haven't wasted our time," he went on. "We've plenty to think about, and at least we know what the opposition looks like."

"Why didn't you grab them while you had the chance?" Minnie wanted to know.

"It wasn't the moment," Biggles told him. "Given enough rope they'll hang themselves. We'll get them when it suits us. The position is a bit unusual. There was a robbery, but the stolen goods have been recovered. But there's a more important factor. The man they coshed is still in hospital, critically ill. If he dies the case becomes one of murder, and that's a very different matter. What the dickens can Ginger be doing?"

They waited, anxiety mounting as time went on. Indeed, it was getting on for an hour later, and Biggles was on his feet to organise a search, when Ginger, somewhat breathless, arrived on the scene.

"You've been a long time," complained Biggles. "We were getting worried. What have you been doing?"

"I've been for a ride and I had to walk back," informed Ginger.

"Did you get the number of their car?"

"I did. I also saw where it went."

"Good work. How did you manage that?"

"If you'll stop shooting questions at me I'll tell you all about it," Ginger said. "What happened was this. I saw the two men, so I went to the hedge to wait for them to come back to their car, which they'd left on the side of the road. I got its number. Incidentally, it was the taxi. For obvious reasons I daren't go too close for fear of being seen. When they did come back they arrived in a hurry and didn't waste any time in pushing off."

"So there was nothing more you could do," put in Biggles.

"Wait a minute. I haven't finished yet," resumed Ginger. "I had a stroke of luck. It came as a young fellow on a motor bike. I stopped him, told him I was a police officer and wanted to check on a car not far in front. He told me to get on behind, which I did, and he roared off doing a ton. Scared me rigid. Having got in sight of the taxi I was just in time to see it turn into a private drive. When we got to it I dropped off; thanked my transport who then went on his way. I saw the drive led to a big modern-looking red brick house. This, it

seemed, was where the taxi had gone. This was all I really wanted to know so I didn't go any closer. Of course, having no transport I had to walk back here. Now you know why I couldn't get back any sooner."

"Good show," congratulated Biggles. "Sorry if I was a bit short with you. I suppose you didn't get the name of the house?"

"It was staring at me, painted on the gate."

"What was it?"

"Lotton Hall."

Biggles' face softened in a faint smile. "Wonderful! According to the constable that's the nearest house to the spot where we're standing. That makes it even more interesting. Now we seem to be really getting somewhere."

"So now we go and have a look at this house?" conjectured Minnie.

Biggles shook his head. "Not just yet. We've done enough for today. We can afford to take our time now we know what we know. We'll get along home. I could do with a nice cup of tea."

Chapter Seven

Biggles and his party walked back to the car, still standing where it had been left at the rendezvous with the local police officer who had been detailed to show them where the stolen mail had been found.

Before getting in Biggles said: "I've just had a thought. I'd like another word with our obliging policeman. I'll take the East Grinstead road. If he didn't hurry we might overtake him. That would save us coming back tomorrow."

In this they were lucky, for they had not gone far when they saw the policeman in conversation with a motorist; in fact, giving him his best route to somewhere. Biggles waited for the motorist to go on his way then called the officer over.

"When we were in the wood you said you thought the nearest house would be Lotton Hall," he reminded. "Can you tell me who lives there?"

"Certainly. It's a Mr. Zolton. Mr. Nestor Zolton," answered the policeman readily.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Not much. He bought the place about a year ago, paid a lot of money for it so I've heard. He must have plenty, for he always seems ready to put his hand in his pocket for local charities."

"Unusual name. Is he British?"

"I don't know. He might be. If you mean is he a coloured gentleman I'd say no, although he's dark, as if he might have been born in Cyprus, or somewhere like that. To tell the truth I've only seen him once or twice, always in his car, when he comes into the town shopping. His chauffeur goes to the shops. The only time I saw him get out he had to use a stick, as if he suffered from rheumatism or maybe had met with an accident at some time."

"I imagine he would have an expensive car," prompted Biggles.

"No. It looks like an ordinary taxi with a few extras as if he had had it built for him. He might find it difficult to get in and out of these modern low cars."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Biggles asked.

"I don't think so. Someone told me he's retired after making a pile of money out of shady gambling joints in London, but how that story got about I don't know. You can't believe everything you hear."

I also heard he breeds dogs for a hobby. I believe that's true because I've heard 'em barking as I've gone past."

"What sort of dogs?"

"That I can't tell you, but from the noise they make I think they must be big dogs of some sort. What's all this about, sir, if you don't mind me asking? Has he been up to something?"

"No. Oh no," returned Biggles quickly. "I'm merely checking up on anyone who lives near the wood. You've told me what I wanted to know so I won't keep you any longer. We'll press on home."

The constable went on his way.

"Does that tell us anything?" asked Algy, as Biggles having turned the car, headed back up the London road.

"Not a great deal," Biggles answered. "The most interesting fact was about the taxi; but it wouldn't do to jump to conclusions. We'll have a look at the place from the road as we go past." As they approached the drive entrance he dropped his speed to ten miles an hour. However, intervening trees made it impossible to see anything of the actual house. He did not stop.

"Notice anything?" he asked Algy, sitting beside him, as he drove on.

"One thing struck me."

"What was it?"

"That big meadow on the south side of the place would be plenty big enough to put a small plane down in. There was no stock of any sort that I saw."

"You make a point. I can add to it. The elms on the lower side of the field had been topped."

"What of it? They're topping elms everywhere, and taking some down altogether, on account of some disease that's struck them."

"Even so, if we're both thinking on the same lines, those trees are now less of an obstruction. There may be nothing in it. We must be careful not to let our imaginations run away with us." Biggles continued on his way towards London.

Little was said on the way, Biggles from his expression doing some hard thinking. On arrival at Scotland Yard, telling the others that he had decided to report to the chief before taking further steps on his own account, he went down to the Air Commodore's office.

There he was greeted with the question: "Well, have you found the answers?" spoken in a way that did not expect an answer in the

affirmative.

"I think we have found one or two of them," Biggles answered, occupying his usual chair in front of the Air Commodore's desk.

"Good," was the curt reply. "We've got to move quickly."

"Why the rush?"

"The case is now one of murder. The unfortunate driver of the van who was coshed defending the mail died this afternoon without recovering consciousness."

Biggles made a grimace. "I'm sorry to hear that. What a pity."

"We've got to get the men who did it," declared the Air Commodore. "People are getting restless over these murders. There have been too many, fortunately outside our sphere of operations. Now tell me. How did you get on this afternoon? Did you see anyone in the wood?"

"There were more people than I expected," Biggles said with grim humour, and then went on to narrate what had transpired in the spinney. This included the discovery that the kitbag had been dropped from the air. The Air Commodore received this information with such astonishment as might have been expected. Not until Biggles had finished did he make any comment. Then he said: "It looks as if this man Zolton might be behind the gang who did this mailbag job."

"I don't say he's behind the gang, but as his house, and his car, are apparently being used he must know something about it."

"What are you going to do about it? Have you made any sort of plan?"

"Not yet. I haven't had time. Before doing anything I shall go through our records to see if anything is known about this fellow Zolton. We might have his photograph, or those of the men we saw this afternoon. There shouldn't be any difficulty in identifying them. What I do next will depend on what I find — if anything. I shall probably come to you for instructions."

"You don't think it would be a good thing to go to Lotton Hall with a search warrant to find out what's going on there?" suggested the Air Commodore.

"Biggles shook his head. "Frankly, no. I feel it's a bit too early for that. If we found nothing, as seems probable if this man Zolton is smart, we should ruin any chances we have of getting our hands on these thugs. The man I'd really like to see, if he wasn't killed, is this

fellow who was shot on the road. If he's able to talk he should now be in a mood to spill the beans on the gang. He may be in Lotton Hall, but we don't know that for certain so it would be risky to reckon on it."

The Air Commodore sat back in his chair. "Tell me this. What's your summing up of the affair as you see it now?"

"Very well, sir. The raid was organised by someone who knew about the movements of registered mail. He didn't do the dirty work himself. He hired professional crooks to do that. Having got the mail their job was to rush it to some pre-arranged hiding place, possibly Lotton Hall. The head man wouldn't want to keep it there, so having packed it in a kitbag he put it in an aircraft, which he had laid on for the job, to take it somewhere else; perhaps overseas. The man we saw in the wood wearing an R.A.F. tie may have been the pilot. He took off with the swag on board. What happened after that is a matter of guesswork. The kitbag may have fallen out by accident. Or did he throw it overboard deliberately? If so, why? Knowing what was in the bag he may have dumped it overboard intending to come back in his own time to collect it. That's why he was in the wood. He hadn't been able to find the bag, which is understandable. He may have been there before, searching for it."

"That sounds reasonable," conceded the Air Commodore. "Having dropped the bag where he reckoned on finding it again what would he do with the plane? If he started from Lotton Hall he'd hardly have the nerve to go back there and say he'd lost his precious cargo."

"True enough," agreed Biggles. "That's the weak spot in my theory. Where is the plane now? The one man who must certainly know, if he's still alive, would be the pilot. Possibly the man we saw wearing an R.A.F. tie. He put the bag overboard. At least, he knew roughly where it fell. That's why he was in the wood. Why did he do it? That's the big question."

"If we knew that we could guess the rest," the Air Commodore said.

"It shouldn't be beyond us to work it out," returned Biggles. "There are still one or two angles to be investigated."

"Such as?"

"The weather conditions on the night the bag was dropped. I assume it was at night because no one but a fool would drop a large

object in broad daylight hoping no one would see it fall. I'll check with the weather men."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. A thought has just occurred to me. Structural failure, or engine failure, might have had something to do with it. In either case the pilot would be desperate to get his wheels on the ground; but with what he had on board he wouldn't dare to land at an official aerodrome. So what would he do? I'd chuck the bag overboard where I'd be confident of being able to find it again. The spinney, for instance. Of course, he might have aimed for somewhere else; Lotton Hall, for instance, which isn't far away. But if it was a moonless night, or with cloud about, he could easily have missed his mark. Anything could have happened."

"How right you are," agreed the Air Commodore. "Anyhow, your . supposition is reasonable. The trouble is, how are you going to prove it, or even check on it?"

Biggles smiled wanly. "I suppose I shall just have to go on flogging my brain. At all events, I have something to work on. I'll let you know what happens, sir," he concluded, as he left the room.

Returning to his own office, where the others were waiting: "The wretched postman those devils coshed is dead," he announced briefly. "So now it's a case of murder. Which of those thugs actually struck the old man doesn't matter. They're all in the same boat as far as I'm concerned. To kill an old man who is simply doing his job, just for money, is beyond all excuse. Just a minute while I have a word with Inspector Gaskin. He may be able to help us."

Having called the Inspector on the intercom telephone all he said was: "I'm interested in a character named Zolton. Nestor Zolton. I don't know of his nationality but he lives at a place called Lotton Hall, in Surrey. You might let me know if we have anything on him. I'm just going to have a look through our photos. See you later."

Turning to the others he went on: "This afternoon we saw three men in the spinney. We had plenty of time to have a good look at them. There's just a chance we may find their mugs in our records. Let's go and have a look."

They all went to the department where thousands of photographs of known crooks are filed and spent some time there; but it was without the result they hoped for. "Of course, they may have changed their appearance since these shots were taken," Biggles remarked, as

he closed the last book. "Professional crooks, knowing we have their pictures here, will go to a lot of trouble to do that, burning their fingers with acid to change the prints, plastic surgery and all that sort of thing. No matter. I have plans for tomorrow so we'll pack up. There's nothing more we can do tonight."

They were back in their own office when Inspector Gaskin one of the most knowledgeable officers in the Force who had often co-operated with them, came in. "I can't find anything on this man you were asking about," he said. "You didn't give me much to go on and he may have changed his name."

Biggles nodded. "Could be. Thanks, chief."

"No trouble. What's on the book?"

"Murder."

Gaskin grimaced. "Let me know if I can be of any help."

"I will," Biggles said.

After the Inspector had gone Ginger remarked: "If you have plans for tomorrow would I be right in supposing you have an idea?"

"You would, one that could keep us all busy for some time," answered Biggles. "Let's go home and talk about it. The Air Commodore has given me the go-ahead."

Later, after the evening meal, Biggles revealed his plans. "We have one or two lines to work on, which means there'll be work for everyone," he said. "There's the spinney, this place Lotton Hall, and somewhere there must be a plane of some sort, probably still in one piece, because had it crashed we'd have been told about it. In fact, had there been a crash it would have been reported in the Press."

"So where do we start, old boy?" asked Bertie, mechanically polishing his monocle.

"I'll tell you," replied Biggles. "Let's take one thing at a time. After giving this conundrum a lot of thought I've come to the conclusion that the bag with the money in it was dropped for one of two reasons. Either the pilot flying the boodle had the bright idea of double-crossing his pals and grabbing it all for himself or he may have run into trouble. Anyway, something went wrong. The weather may have had something to do with it. Where's the plane now? It must be on the ground somewhere. Algy, I'm giving you the job of finding it. First thing in the morning you'll go to the meteorological office and find out exactly what the weather was like on the night of the robbery and the day or two following; cloud conditions, direction

and force of the wind, the lot. That may tell us something. Having done that you'll contact every landing ground within fifty miles of the spinney the object being to find out if an aircraft was in the air, or was brought in, during the period in question. Was anything wrong with it? Who was flying it? If it's still at the same place and anything else you can dig up. Got that?"

Algy nodded. "Okay, I'm with you."

"As it may be a long job you can work by telephone or by flying round the clubs," went on Biggles. "If you get a clue waffle along and get the facts."

"That's all clear. Leave it to me," Algy said.

Biggles continued. "That settles that angle. Now then. I'm still interested in that spinney. It's a fairly safe bet that the people we saw there today will go back. They all have an interest or they wouldn't have gone there. There's a lot of money at stake and they're not likely to abandon it without making another effort to find it. They must be wondering what on earth happened, and although they saw us there I see no reason why they should associate us with it. Wherefore I think we should keep an eye on the place. Bertie, I shall leave that to you. You can go down by car, and without leaving it too close take up a position from which you'll be able to see anything that goes on. You may have to wait some time so you'd better put something to eat in your pocket. Be careful. Don't forget that at least one of these toughs carries a gun."

"Any objection to me carrying one?" asked Bertie.

"Please yourself, as long as you only use it in an emergency."

"Fair enough."

Biggles paused to stub his cigarette before he resumed.

"Now for this place Lotton Hall," he went on. "As it seems that's where the taxi lives it must in some way be involved. How? To find out is likely to be the most difficult, and the most dangerous, job of all. For that reason I shall put two of you on it. That means you, Ginger, and Minnie. It might be an opportunity for him to practise his Indian tricks. I needn't tell you what to do. Work it out between yourselves. Keep the place under observation but try not to be seen and don't take unnecessary risks. What I said about Bertie and the spinney applies to you — perhaps more so. We're up against a dangerous gang. Watch who comes and goes; what cars there are — that sort of thing. It's possible that the man we saw in the spinney,

the one sporting an R.A.F. tie, may be there. I doubt if you'll see him. He may be dead, in which case there'll be a body to dispose of. On the other hand, if he was only wounded he may still be alive. What he's doing will of course depend on how badly he was hurt. Well, I think that's about all. Any questions?"

Ginger had one. "What are you going to do?" he asked, not unnaturally.

"I shall stay in the office on reserve," informed Biggles. "If anyone has anything to report he can ring me there. Or if I hear nothing I may run down about twelve noon to see how you're getting on. That would save you dashing off perhaps some distance, to find a telephone. Now, as we look like having a busy day tomorrow I suggest we have an early night," he concluded, getting up.

Chapter Eight

With the exception of Biggles who, having no need for haste went to the Air Police office at the usual time, after an early breakfast everyone else departed to begin the task that had been assigned to him.

To save extra transport, for there were obvious reasons against using official police cars, it had been arranged for Bertie, in his private Jaguar, to give Ginger and Minnie a lift to somewhere within easy reach of Lotton Hall. There appeared to be nothing against this.

They would know exactly where to find Bertie should the necessity arise. Or, when they were ready to return home they could wait by the Jaguar until Bertie arrived to collect them. They would find his car close to the spot where Biggles had left his on the previous day.

In any case a Green Line coach operated on the main road. Should all else fail this would take them back to London. So there appeared to be no reason to use an extra car. Biggles was informed of this arrangement and agreed to it.

It should be said here that at this stage of the proceedings he was really doing no more than seeking the evidence he needed to build up a case against the mailbag robbers. He was fairly sure he already knew some of them at least by sight. But this was not enough. He could prove nothing against them. Should he strike prematurely no doubt they would all be able to find a reason for being in the spinney where the stolen mail was found. The question of recovering the stolen mail did not arise because it had already been found.

In this respect the case was an unusual one in that it was not a matter of preventing a crime or of recovering stolen property. By a pure accident the stolen mail had been found. But a man had been murdered and that was a much more serious offence. Which particular member of the gang involved had struck the fatal blow was not of first importance because according to law, when a number of persons have conspired together to commit a crime resulting in the death of someone the guilt rests on all those taking part.

So, what was now happening was really this. The crime that had been committed was already half forgotten by the general public: but not by the police, who never close a case while a murderer is at large. In short, as it now looked as if an aircraft had been used, to the Air

Police had fallen the task of finding the villains; and more than that, evidence to convict them. Biggles was not looking for one particular man; he wanted the whole gang in the bag, if for no other reason than what they had done once they would probably attempt again. Most of all, of course, Biggles wanted the head man, the “brains” behind the organisation. The one clue he had uncovered, a slender one, was that he might be found at Lotton Hall. On this he was now working.

Bertie, with Ginger and Minnie, set out for his objective, the spinney in which by a fluke the stolen mail had been found by a wandering naturalist. It was a fine, clear, autumn morning, so with the countryside looking its best he would not have asked for a more agreeable task, even though if it produced no result it might prove somewhat boring.

He dropped Ginger and Minnie at a convenient distance from their scene of operations, Lotton Hall, and having reminded them where they would find his car, and the ignition key should they need it, he went on his way.

Arriving at the spot on which he had decided he parked the Jaguar tight against the verge and continued on foot, cross-country, towards the spinney, for having once been to the place there would be no difficulty in finding it again. There appeared to be not a soul about, which suited his purpose. Not that he expected to see anyone.

Indeed, to admit the truth, although he could see Biggles’ point in keeping the coppice under observation, in his heart he doubted if he would see any of the men they had previously encountered there. He could think of no reason why they should return to the spot.

Anyhow, if he did see them there was no reason why they should see him. He was not looking for trouble; so should they turn up, as long as he could make out what they were doing it would obviously be wise to keep out of their way. There was really nothing more he could do, anyway. There was no question of taking them into custody.

These, then, were Bertie’s thoughts as he trudged across the rough field to the group of trees that was his final destination. He had not decided exactly where to take up his position. One place seemed as good as another. Reaching the trees, after giving the matter some consideration he went on to get as near as possible to the side facing the estate of Lotton Hall, thinking that if he was to have any visitors it would most likely be from that direction they would come.

The matter was resolved for him when he came to a half-fallen windblown fir tree, the fall of which had been arrested by its branches catching in the lower ones of an ancient oak. It seemed as good a place as any in which to wait. The surrounding undergrowth was fairly sparse so he would have a reasonably clear view for some little distance around. At all events, sufficient for his purpose.

Finding the grass and bracken still wet from early morning dew he clambered up the sloping trunk of the leaning fir until he came to the part where the top was held by one of the lowest branches of the oak. There, finding a seat provided by a crutch he settled down to wait for whatever might befall. It seemed likely that he would have to spend the day there, probably to no purpose.

He had occupied his perch for a little while and was finding some entertainment watching two young fox cubs playing when one of them stiffened, ears cocked. Then in a flash they had both gone.

Bertie was still wondering what had alarmed them, because he found it difficult to believe that from his elevated position they could get his scent, when the question was answered. From no great distance

away came the murmur of voices. Human voices. They sounded close enough to be in the spinney. This gave him a tinge of disquiet, because although it did not necessarily mean that the voices were those of the men who had been there yesterday it seemed more than likely that they were. It was to watch for them that he himself had been sent to the spinney. It looked as if Biggles had been right in thinking they would return. The uncomfortable thought struck Bertie that they might have been there all the time and had perhaps seen him coming. Or had they only just arrived? This was a question time might answer.

At all events, he was thankful that he had put himself in a position in which he was not likely to be seen; for the last thing he wanted was a head-on encounter, which could serve no useful purpose and, in fact, would almost certainly defeat his purpose in being there.

Listening all ears, to use the common expression, he waited.

Sometimes the voices came nearer, sometimes they receded, as if the speakers — for there were at least two of them — were moving about haphazardly. Or were they looking for something? If so, it needed no great effort of imagination to work out what it was.

Watching the ground below from his leafy bower, all doubts about the identity of the persons with whom he shared the coppice ended when into view came a party of no fewer than four men. They came to a halt under the very tree in which Bertie was ensconced; which, by accident or design was within a few yards of the tree under which the kitbag containing the stolen mail had been found.

Of the party that now stopped and stood talking only one caused Bertie any surprise. And it was a very great surprise. For it was none other than the man who wore the R.A.F. tie. The man they had seen on the previous afternoon. Indeed, he was still wearing it. He also wore something else, something that had not been there on that occasion. It was a bandage round his forehead. This, at once, answered a question. So the man had not been killed when he had been shot at the roadside when he went back to his car. He had only been wounded, and obviously not seriously, since although he looked pale and ill he was already on his feet again.

Another fact was evident. He was not there from choice. Or so it seemed. For he was being held by the arm by the heavy-weight type who had also been in the spinney the day before. True, the purpose of this may have been to support him, assuming he was still unsteady on his feet as the result of his wound. But to Bertie it looked more as if it was to prevent him from running away. The big man's little partner on the previous occasion was also there.

The fourth member of the party Bertie had never seen before. He was a well dressed, olive-skinned, paunchy little man who carried, and in fact walked with the aid of a shooting stick: that is, a stick with double handles at the top which could be opened when necessary to provide a seat. He now used it for the purpose for which it had been designed. He looked angry, tired and impatient.

To some extent this applied to every member of the party. On arrival they had all been talking and the conversation now continued. The man who Bertie suspected was Zolton, the owner of Lotton Hall, said to the ex-R.A.F. man with some asperity: "Come on, where is it? How much longer are you going to keep this up. I've had about iv enough of this foolery."

"I tell you I don't know where it is," was the protesting reply, in a plaintive voice. "I've said so all along. That's all I can say."

"Do you expect us to believe that?"

"You can believe what you like but it's the truth," was the surly

response.

“You dropped it, didn’t you?”

“I’ve said so.”

“Then you must have seen where it fell.”

“I can’t see in the dark. This is where I aimed for. The wind must have been tricky.”

“Why drop it at all?”

“I’ve told you. I had to get down somewhere. You wouldn’t expect me to be such a fool as to land on an aerodrome with that stuff on board.”

“Then why not drop it nearer the house?”

“It might have fallen on the road and been found by someone before I could get back. I thought this wood would be a better place. I didn’t think there’d be any trouble in finding it.”

The little man who was known to carry a gun now produced it.

“You know what’s going to happen to you if you don’t come clean, don’t you?” he said significantly.

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

The heavyweight boxer type now broke in. “Come on. We’re wasting our time,” he told the others. “Let the double crossing little skunk have it. No one’s likely to find him here.”

“No, don’t do that,” pleaded the R.A.F. man desperately. “I’m as anxious to find the stuff as you are.”

How this argument would have ended had it been allowed to run its full course is a matter for speculation. But it concluded abruptly, and Bertie was the cause, although it was not of his seeking. What happened was this. Two or three times the sloping trunk of the fir tree on which he was perched had moved an inch or two as if it was slipping, for which the extra weight on it may have been responsible.

This caused Bertie some concern, but, luckily as he thought, the men below had been so taken up with their altercation that they had not noticed it. Afraid it might happen again Bertie decided to move his position a trifle. This proved to be a fatal mistake. Without warning the roots of the tree were torn out of the ground so that the entire trunk fell crashing to the ground, taking the oak branch on which it was resting with it. And, of course, Bertie, who landed in a shower of twigs, leaves and small branches.

Naturally, the men below, seeing and hearing what was happening made a dash for safety, scattering like sparks from a

blacksmith's anvil. They did not go farther than was necessary. Having stopped, as Bertie slowly disentangled himself they stared at him with such expressions as would be expected in the circumstances.

Bertie, unhurt although somewhat shaken, rose up brushing his clothes. Putting on his most famous grin he said: "What cheer! Sorry to barge in on you like this. Hope I didn't give you too much of a fright. How careless can one be — if you see what I mean?"

Zolton was the first to speak. "Where the hell did you come from?" he demanded, in a voice still stiff with astonishment.

"I made so much noise I'd have thought you'd have noticed," returned Bertie cheerfully.

"What were you doing in that tree?" Zolton fired the question.

"If you must know I was looking for a warga-warga bird," informed Bertie, with a straight face.

"A what!"

"A warga-warga bird. You know the little chappie that flies backwards to keep the sun out of his eyes."

Zolton scowled. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"That was the general idea," Bertie admitted, frankly.

The little gunman now cut in, his voice brittle with suspicion.

Pointing at Bertie he rapped out: "He's one of the lot we saw here yesterday. What's their game? They're up to something."

The question was not answered. Instead, the heavily-built man, after looking round quickly, asked another. "Where's Crane?"

This evidently was the name of the R.A.F. man. Presumably taking advantage of the situation he had disappeared.

Swearing, the gunman whipped out his pistol. "I'll get the little rat," he grated. He looked at Bertie. "Did you see which way he went?"

Bertie had seen the escapee fade into the bushes. He pointed. But it was not in the direction he had seen the R.A.F. man go. He acted on impulse, not pausing to ask himself why he should take sides with any of them.

Chapter Nine

Ginger and Minnie, having been dropped off by Bertie a little way short of the drive leading to the big house, walked on towards it. Lotton Hall, as they could now see — or the upper part of it, was a fairly modern red brick mansion standing in extensive gardens, as do most such establishments. There was a good range of outbuildings more or less adjacent which may have originally been stables and coach houses but were now probably garages. No doubt they were also used as the kennels for the dogs that the owner of the place was said to breed.

On one side the ground lay open and flat; in fact the big field which it had been thought would be large enough for a light plane to get down in provided it was in the hands of an experienced pilot, or the machine might end up in collision with one of the thick hedges that bounded the field on all sides. It did not pass unnoticed that there were no animals grazing so that at least the field was free from that sort of obstruction.

Just what Ginger and Minnie were going to do when they were closer had not been decided, for with such meagre information as they so far possessed it had not been possible to make anything like a definite plan. The first thing was obviously to make a careful reconnaissance from the road. It was this they talked about as, with Bertie's car now out of sight they walked on slowly, still on the main road, where they had every right to be.

It was already clear that the only way to get near the house or the outbuildings without being seen would be by taking advantage of the cover provided by some semi-wild gardens on the side of the house farthest from the big field. Wild-garden, however, is a broad term. It can mean almost anything. In fact, the house stood in a sort of artificial park. Any big trees such as elms and the like which may have been there when the place was planned had been felled and their places taken by smaller flowering trees and shrubs such as prunus, laburnum and lilac, with a sprinkling of Japanese maples now blazing in their highly-coloured autumn foliage. Between these ornamental introductions there were open grassy spaces, as could be seen by looking over the hedge. In short, the one side of the house had been subject to what is commonly called landscape-gardening. It had not been forgotten that the present occupier of the house made a hobby of

breeding dogs, but so far there had been neither sight nor sound of them.

“We shan’t learn much from here, that’s certain,” remarked Ginger.

“The trouble is we don’t really know what we’re looking for; that is, anything in particular. I can’t see how we can hope to get close to the house without being spotted by somebody inside. I suppose we could try to find a way through those shrubs. Perhaps it wouldn’t matter if we were seen. We could always find an excuse for being there. You can’t be charged with trespassing unless you’re doing damage.”

“Let’s walk along a bit to see what the place looks like from the other side,” suggested Minnie.

They continued on down the road and had nearly reached the drive entrance when they struck what at first seemed like a stroke of bad luck, in that they were just too late to see something, or someone, of importance. Out of the drive, slowly, as its junction with the main road demanded, came a car. It was neither the taxi nor the Cortina.

After a short pause to confirm that the road was clear, instead of coming towards them, which would have revealed the driver clearly, to Ginger’s disgust it turned in the opposite direction, so that it was impossible to see who was in it.

“Confound it!” snapped Ginger. “We’ve just missed the boat. Anyhow, I got its number although that isn’t going to tell us much.”

He put a hand on Minnie’s arm. “Do you notice anything odd?”

“No.”

“The gate’s shut. How did that happen? The man driving the car didn’t get out so he couldn’t have done it.”

“Somebody must have shut it behind him.”

“There isn’t anyone else.” They had now reached the drive and there was not a soul in sight. Ginger went on. “If the gate isn’t automatic it must be controlled from the house. We’d better remember that. It’s a pretty heavy gate, with wire netting all over it — to keep the dogs in, I suppose. It would be difficult for anyone to get out in a hurry.”

Nothing more was said about it. They walked on, and had not gone far when who should they see coming towards them, on his bicycle, but Police Constable Murray, the officer who the previous afternoon had shown them the way to the spinney where the kitbag

had been found.

“He must be going round his beat,” remarked Ginger. “He told us yesterday that he came this way as far as the crossroads. He must have met the car that just left here. There’s a chance he may know it, and saw who was in it.”

When they met the constable he stopped and got off his bike. “You still here?” was his greeting, in a surprised voice.

Ginger answered. “We’ve been home but we’ve come back for another look round. Tell me, did you meet a car — about a minute ago?”

“Yes.”

“Did you recognise it?”

The policeman smiled. “Know it? I see it practically every day.”

“Then you must know who it belongs to.”

“Of course I know. It’s Doctor Grey, one of our local doctors.”

“Was he driving it when you met it just now?”

“Yes. He pulled up and spoke to me.”

“He’s been to Lotton Hall.”

“So he told me.”

“Is somebody ill?”

“More or less. Might have been worse. They had an accident there yesterday. A friend of the family was cleaning a small-bore rifle and it went off. The old story. He didn’t know it was loaded. The bullet grazed his forehead and knocked him out. Nothing serious. Another half-inch and he’d have had it. Mr. Zolton didn’t know how bad the wound was so he thought he’d better send for the doctor. All that was needed was a bandage. The doctor has just been along to see if everything was all right.”

“What’s the name of this wounded man?” inquired Ginger.

“He didn’t say.”

“How did the doctor find him?”

“He’s okay. Up and about again. It was only a graze.”

“How lucky can you be?” murmured Ginger.

“I shall have to have a word with Mr. Zolton about that rifle,” the constable said.

“Why?”

“Speaking from memory I don’t think he has a firearms certificate. As you know we’re strict on that sort of thing nowadays.” The policeman put a foot on the pedal of his bicycle. “Well, I must be

getting along now.”

“Are you going to see Zolton now?”

“No. There’s no hurry. I’ll speak to him next time I see him in town. He’ll probably wonder how I got to hear about the rifle. Let me know if I can be of any more help. You’ll usually find me at the station or on traffic duty in the town.” The constable went on his way.

Ginger looked at Minnie seriously. “You know, unless that copper is a bit dim on the uptake, and I don’t think he’s that, he must be wondering what the deuce we’re doing, hanging about here. Be funny if he decided to keep an eye on us. Anyhow, it was a bit of luck we met him. He’s told us just what we wanted to know. Or one of the things. The man who was shot wasn’t killed after all. Not only that, but apparently he’s already on his feet.”

“I’m surprised Zolton bothered to send for the doctor,” mused Minnie.

“I think I could guess the answer to that,” returned Ginger. “He didn’t know how badly the man was hurt and was anxious to keep him alive. Dead, he’d be no use. Alive, he’d be able to talk. Zolton must still believe he knows what happened to the stolen mail. That’s assuming, as Biggles does, that he was in the cockpit of the plane that dumped the bag in the wood. Let’s move on a bit to see what there is to be seen on the far side of the house.”

“What are you expecting to see?”

“I haven’t a clue. Your guess is as good as mine. We know that the man who was shot was taken to the Hall, so it could be that at the present moment Zolton or some of the gang are putting the heat on him to get him to talk.”

“I wonder how much he does know. From the way he behaved yesterday it can’t be much. We know more about what happened to the mail than he does.”

“What I’d like to know is, what those toughs are thinking about us,” Ginger said. “They must have realised by now that we weren’t in the wood yesterday to look for nuts or blackberries.”

Nothing more was said. They moved on a little way. Ginger stopped. Climbing the low grass bank he looked over the hedge. In a moment he was down again.

“What is it?” asked Minnie quickly, realising that Ginger must have seen something.

“They’re on their way to the spinney now,” informed Ginger

tersely. "Or that's what it looks like."

"Who?"

"The whole bunch of 'em. Four men. The three we saw in the wood yesterday and a short little fellow who might be Zolton. The R.A.F. type appears to have a bandage round his head. Which confirms what the constable has just told us. It could be they're taking him to the spinney to make him produce the swag."

"That lets us out," stated Minnie. "Bertie will be there by now. He'll see what they get up to."

Ginger hesitated. "I'm not so sure about that," he said, doubtfully.

"They're a dangerous lot, as we have reason to know. If they bump into Bertie there could be trouble, and he'd be one against four. At least one carries a gun. I don't like it."

"I can see that; but what can we do about it?"

"I think one of us at least should go to the spinney to make sure Bertie comes to no harm."

Minnie replied. "I'd have thought this would have been our opportunity to look round the house while we know the people are out. There's nothing to stop us."

"Don't forget the dogs."

"They'll be in the kennels."

"We don't know that for sure."

"It shouldn't take us long to find out."

The argument went on for another minute. Then a compromise was reached. This was to follow up both possibilities. Ginger would reconnoitre the spinney to check that Bertie was not in need of support. While he was away Minnie would explore the outside of the Hall for clues that would help to confirm Biggles' suspicions that in some way it was involved in the mail robbery.

So it was left. It seemed a reasonable arrangement without any great risk in either direction.

Ginger walked on down the road to the junction of the hedge which went off at right angles to the spinney. This he thought should enable him to reach the little wood unobserved by anyone. The party he had seen making its way towards it from the Hall was now out of sight, having already reached the same objective as his own. He glanced up and down the road. Minnie was striding in the opposite direction to return to the wild-garden area of shrubs that had already

been noted. There was a certain amount of traffic on the road, mostly private cars with an occasional commercial vehicle, but as it was not concerned with him he took no notice of it.

He climbed a convenient gate and set off along the hedge.

The spinney was now in plain view about a quarter of a mile ahead. He walked with his eyes on it but without taking any particular precautions, seeing, so far, no reason to do so. Should he be seen he would be taken for a casual Rambler. Or so he hoped. He was more concerned with avoiding long grass that was still soaking wet with dew. Naturally, he kept his eyes as far as possible on the edge of the spinney for signs of human activity. He saw none.

Content with this state of affairs he pressed on.

Chapter Ten

Ginger had reached to within twenty to thirty yards of the edge of the spinney, and was looking for the easiest way to enter it, when he was brought to an abrupt halt by a resounding crash somewhere in the wood. It sounded as if a tree had fallen, as in fact, as we know, it had. It struck Ginger as a little odd that it should choose this moment, when there was hardly a breath of wind, to fall; but beyond hoping that Bertie was not under it when it came down he decided that it did not interfere with what he was doing so he moved on.

Drawing closer he paused again when he thought he heard the sound of voices; but knowing there were men in the wood this was understandable. It merely served to warn him to exercise extreme caution, which he did, taking care not to crack any dead sticks by treading on them.

He made contact with the fringe of the spinney at a point he had never before seen, and was disconcerted to find it thick with close-growing hazel shrubs through which it would obviously be next to impossible to force a passage without a certain amount of noise. This he was more than ever anxious to avoid, as his purpose now was to get close enough to the voices to ascertain if Bertie's was among them.

No doubt the cautious silence with which he moved was largely responsible for what followed. Finding a thin place in the hazels that offered a fairly easy passage he had moved up to it when he was startled by sounds of someone approaching in a great hurry. Running of footsteps and panting breath. Before he could move aside or take any sort of evasive action a man burst through the bushes in such haste that they came into collision with a force that sent them both reeling. In fact, the newcomer lost his balance and fell. For a moment he lay on the ground, resting on one hand, gasping for breath.

Recovering from the shock Ginger gathered himself together to ask the man in no uncertain terms what he was doing, charging about like a mad bull. But words died on his lips when he saw who it was. He had seen him before. It was the man who sported an R.A.F. tie. He now wore a bandage round his forehead, and, of course, after what he had been told, Ginger knew why.

By this time the man had scrambled to his feet. "Get me out of here," he blurted with desperate urgency. "If you will I'll tell you

something that'll make it worth your while."

"What's the hurry?" inquired Ginger, although he had a pretty good idea. _

"They're after me."

"Who's after you?"

"Never mind. They'll kill me if they catch me. I've got to get away."

"Who's going to kill you?"

"The people I work for."

"What have you done to them? Double-crossed them, or something?"

"No. I've told them the truth but they won't believe me."

"Something to do with that kitbag?" prompted Ginger.

The man's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about it?"

"Maybe more than you think."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Could be."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know about it if you'll help me to get away from here," promised the man, still in a state approaching panic.

"How do you suppose I can help you?"

"I expect you've got a car somewhere handy."

Ginger shook his head. "Nothing doing. I'm due to meet a friend o mine here."

"Do you mean a feller with an eyeglass?"

"Yes. Why? Have you seen him?"

"Too true. You'd better forget about him."

"Why?"

"They've got him."

"Who's got him?"

"The people I've been talking about. They're a bunch of crooks."

"What are they doing with him?"

"I dunno. I didn't wait to see. Your pal was sitting in a tree. The tree came down. Nearly fell on us. That's how I got away. Took a chance and bolted. They'll be after me so I'm off." The man prepared to resume his flight.

"Just a minute," Ginger said tersely. "Maybe I can help you, if you'll answer some questions for me later."

"Anything you say. But buck up. They'll be here any minute."

“All right. Don’t lose your head.”

“I’ll lose my life if they catch me. They’ve already had one go, as you can see from this bandage.”

Ginger looked at his watch. It was just on noon. Would Biggles come, as he said he might. He didn’t know. But he thought it would be a good thing if he heard what this man had to say. Bertie should take no harm for a little while. “All right,” he said shortly. “If I help you to get clear of this mob will you play straight and tell me the truth about this business?”

“I’ve said so. I’ve had enough.”

“All right then. To start with, what’s your name?”

“Varley.”

“Come on. This way. I’ve got a car handy.” Ginger set off at a run back along the hedge.

They reached the road without interference. Here Ginger turned to the right, and steadying the pace kept on for where Bertie had said he would leave his car. “Now, what’s all this fuss about?” he asked, as they strode on.

“I can tell you in two words,” was the answer. “Gang warfare.”

“How many gangs?”

“Two.”

“And what’s the racket?”

“Dope.”

“What sort of dope?”

“The hard stuff. Heroin.”

This was an answer Ginger did not expect. He was shocked, but he tried not to show it.

“Zolton runs one gang. The men with him now are his personal bodyguard. He’s a Greek Cypriot. Leader of the rival gang is another Cypriot. Turkish. His name’s Alfondari. They hate each other’s guts over the troubles in Cyprus. They both run night clubs in London, but that’s only a cover for peddling dope.”

“If you knew about this why didn’t you inform the police?” Ginger said sternly.

“I didn’t know it when they offered me a job. Later, if I’d squealed, they’d have murdered me. Murder means nothing to them.”

Hearing a car coming behind them Ginger looked back and to his unbounded satisfaction saw Biggles’ old Ford car cruising along the road. He raised a hand. Biggles stopped, looking at Ginger

inquiringly.

“You’d better hear this,” he said urgently. He indicated his companion. “This is the man who was shot yesterday. His name’s Varley. The gang’s after him. He’s ready to talk.” As briefly as possible he repeated what he had just learned.

All Biggles said was: “Get in. Both of you.” This done he drove on a little way and pulled on to a wide grass verge. Then, turning, he spoke curtly to the ex-R.A.F. man. “Go on talking.”

“Who are you?” was not the unnatural reply.

Biggles told him. “You’re in big trouble,” he went on. “Your only chance is to come clean. Were you in the mail robbery?”

“No.”

“Then where do you come into this?”

“My job was to fly a parcel to a cottage Zolton has near the New Forest.”

“And what about this drug racket?”

“Zolton was afraid to keep the stuff here for fear the police got a tip off and raided the house. So what he did was this. I don’t know where he got the heroin but having got it he used to post it by registered mail to an accommodation address, a little hotel in Bloomsbury called the Marquis. It was marked ‘to be called for.’ Then when he wanted it he’d go and collect it. The rival gang got to know about this and —”

“Just a minute,” broke in Biggles. “There’s something I don’t understand. If Zolton expected a parcel of dope by post why did he bother to rob the mail?”

“There was a reason. He had a tip off from one of Alfondari’s gang that they were going to collect the stuff — beat him to the address in Bloomsbury Street. He daren’t risk losing the stuff because his customers would be clamouring for it. You know how they get when they can’t get it.”

“But surely Zolton could have waited at the hotel for the stuff to be delivered?”

“He daren’t risk getting a knife in his ribs. Alfondari had sworn to get him. That’s why he shuts himself up at Lotton Hall. That’s what the raid on the post-office van was about. It wasn’t so much the money. It was the dope Zolton was really after. Having got the mailbag my job was to drop it at the cottage in the New Forest. There’s some open ground handy. Zolton didn’t trust the roads for

fear of being ambushed by Alfondari's gang. I took off from that big field near the Hall but I had to turn back with engine trouble. I `daren't land on an aerodrome because of what I had on board so I dropped the bag as near as I could to Lotton Hall. But the wind was tricky and I saw the bag fall in that little wood. I thought it would be easy to find. I just managed to get to the airfield at Sparham, where I buckled my undercarriage; so I had to leave the plane there. Then I hired a car to take me back to Lotton Hall. When I told Zolton and the gang what had happened they wouldn't believe me. We looked for the bag but couldn't find it. They think I've hidden it somewhere. Joe Chandler, one of the gang, lost his temper and shot me. Then I was taken to the Hall. They're still looking for the bag."

"What was the idea of the white kitbag?"

"Partly for lightness and partly because it would be easy to see in the dark."

"How did the gang get in touch with you in the first instance?"

"When I left the R.A.F. I advertised in the papers for a flying job. Zolton sent for me and offered to take me on as his private pilot. I didn't know then what I was letting myself in for. I hope you believe me."

"I shall soon know if you're telling the truth," replied Biggles. "If we got Zolton and his gang would you be prepared to give evidence against them — bearing in mind that if they were behind prison bars they wouldn't be able to hurt you."

"Yes, after what they've done to me."

"Then I can tell you they won't find the bag in the wood. It was found by a man out for a walk. He handed it to the police. The registered mail was then delivered in the ordinary way. Zolton isn't to know that. If he did know it he'd expect to find the parcel of heroin waiting for him at the Marquis Hotel in Bloomsbury."

"Of course."

"In which case he'd go to collect it."

"As fast as he could get there. His customers will be howling for it."

Biggles thought for a moment. Then he said to Ginger: "Where's Minnie?"

"I left him to explore the grounds round the Hall."

"And Bertie?"

"He went to the spinney. According to this chap he got tangled up

with the gang.”

“Okay, then I’ll tell you what I want you to do,” ordered Biggles crisply. “Go back to the spinney and get in touch with Bertie.”

Ginger looked surprised. “That means the gang will see me.”

“That’s what I hope. You can talk to them.”

Ginger looked even more surprised. “Talk to them? What about?”

“You can tell them the simple truth. What happened in the spinney. How the kitbag was found, taken over by the police who handed the mail over to the Post-Office for delivery. The mail has now been delivered.”

Ginger stared incredulously. “That’s what you want me to tell them?”

“Exactly.”

Ginger shrugged. “Okay, if that’s how you want it. Then what?”

“As it’s unlikely that the gang will have any further interest in you you’d better try to find Minnie and call him off from whatever he’s doing. He needn’t waste any more time scouting round the big house.

Then you might as well all come home.”

“And what are you going to do?” questioned Ginger, naturally.

“I haven’t time to go into details but I shall go back to the office taking Varley with me. I’ll see he’s safe. That’s all. I’ll drop you off as near as I can get to the spinney.”

When this had been done, for a minute Ginger stood on the road watching the rapidly retreating car. He realised Biggles had some scheme in mind but did not waste time trying to work out what it was. Still perplexed he set off along the hedge towards the spinney to carry out his orders.

Chapter Eleven

It was with some misgivings that Ginger approached the fringe of the spinney. If what Varley had told him about Bertie falling out of a tree was true, and he did not doubt it because that would account for the crash he had heard, it seemed likely that Bertie would find himself in trouble with the crooks he had come to watch. It may have been for this purpose he had climbed the tree, he reasoned.

With such thoughts in his mind Ginger pushed a way through the hazel scrub towards the bigger trees nearer the centre.

He had taken only a few steps when again he heard hurrying footsteps coming towards him. He guessed, correctly that this was the pursuit Varley had feared. In view of what he had been ordered to do he did not attempt to avoid being seen. A man appeared. He held an automatic pistol. Ginger recognised him as the smaller of the men he had seen the previous afternoon. This caused him no surprise.

The man pulled up short when he saw Ginger. In a brittle voice he snapped: "Have you seen a feller with a bandage round his head come this way?" Before Ginger could answer he went on, frowning with suspicion. "Why, you're one of the lot who was here yesterday."

"What about it?" inquired Ginger, curtly.

"What's your game?"

"What's yours?"

"Don't try to get smart with me. You're a pal of the bloke who wears an eyeglass."

"So what?"

"Where are you going now?"

"What's that got to do with you? Do you own this place?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you say so earlier? What's the idea of the gun? You playing Cowboys and Indians, or something?"

"I'm not playing at anything, as you'll find out if you give me any more of your sauce. Have you seen a feller with a bandage on his face?"

"I've only just arrived, so how could I see anybody?"

"What are you after?"

"If you must know I'm expecting to meet a friend here."

"The nut with the glass eye?"

"That's right."

“What’s he up to?”

“Why not ask him?”

“What was he doing up a tree?”

“Frankly, I haven’t the remotest idea,” answered Ginger truthfully.

“Okay, if that’s how you want it,” growled the man. “But if you’ll take my advice you’ll clear out.”

“Why?” asked Ginger, blandly.

“You’ll find out.” And with that the man set off at a fast pace along the edge of the spinney.

Ginger watched him go. Then, with an uncomfortable feeling that Bertie might be in need of support he continued on his way. The sound of voices somewhere ahead guided him.

He decided to try to find out what was happening before exposing himself, wherefore he now advanced with increasing caution. He could still hear voices sometimes raised as if in argument, and thinking fast moved towards them. He had seen four men walking towards the copse. He knew two had left the party: Varley, with the bandaged head and the man who was evidently looking for him.

That left only two potential enemies with Bertie, should he still be with them. That meant that in the continued absence of the others the odds would be even. Two against two. So in the event of trouble he and Bertie should be able to hold their own. Unless, of course, the others carried guns. That, of course, would make things more difficult. Wondering what all the talking was about he held on his way, still taking precautions against betraying his presence.

When he arrived at the spot where the conversation was taking place, in a small clearing, peering through the undergrowth he observed a curious, but in view of what he had just been told, a not unexpected spectacle. Seated on the trunk of a fallen fir tree was Bertie, his eyeglass adjusted and wearing on his face an expression of placid unconcern. In front of him were two men, one standing in a threatening attitude and the other supported by a shooting stick. The first he knew from the previous afternoon. The big man — Corsini.

The other was a tubby little man with a sallow complexion he had never before seen, but who, he suspected, was the owner of Lotton Hall. Subsequently this was confirmed.

The subject of the conversation was soon revealed. Bertie was saying: “Forgive me if I appear a bit slow on the uptake, but by what

sort of reasoning can you suppose I would know what was in your bally kitbag?"

"You found it, didn't you?" challenged Zolton.

"Not me, personally. It was a pal of mine. When he showed it to me there was nothing in it. Not a bally thing. Not a sausage. That's what I keep telling you. Don't make me say it again."

Zolton's manner became confidential. "I'll tell you what," he said quietly. "Show us what you did with what was in the bag and I'll give you a hundred pounds."

"Would you, though, by Jove," exclaimed Bertie. "You must want it pretty badly."

"I do."

"Must be something valuable."

"Valuable to me."

"I only wish I could oblige," returned Bertie, sadly. "I could do with a hundred nicker. Who couldn't? I'm sorry I can't help you."

"If you don't know anything about it what are you doing here?"

"I find the solitude refreshing."

"This is my property. I could sue you for trespass."

"That's where you're wrong. You'd have to prove damage."

"You are causing damage."

"How?"

"By disturbing my pheasants."

"Ah! This is where you come into my line of country," declared Bertie, confidently. "If you want pheasants here you'd better see about getting rid of the foxes. As any gamekeeper will tell you, you can have pheasants or, if you like hunting, you can have foxes. You can't have both. Foxes have a taste for pheasant — if you follow me."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," said Zolton, coldly.

Bertie shrugged. "All right, all right. No need to get shirty. I'm only trying to be helpful."

"What were you doing in that tree?"

"Watching the foxes. There must be an earth quite close. The vixen has cubs. Cubs are always hungry. Pheasants make a nice dish. Which is why, as I told you just now, a pheasant hasn't much hope here of living to a ripe old age."

Here the other man broke in. "How much longer are we to listen to this claptrap? Can't you see this smart alec is making a monkey of

us? You can take it from me, he knows plenty. What's he doing here? Come to watch foxes? I'm not falling for that guff."

Said Zolton, with a shrug: "Well, if he won't talk I don't see how we can make him."

"Don't you? I do. Just leave him to me. I'll take that silly grin off his mug."

At this critical moment, as things began to look serious and Ginger decided the time had come for him to reveal himself, the man who had recently spoken to Ginger on the edge of the wood rejoined the party. Fortunately he entered the clearing from the far side so he did not see Ginger lurking in the bushes.

"Did you get him?" asked Zolton quickly.

"No," was the answer, in a voice bitter with disgust. "Not a sign of him. I don't know where he could have got to, unless he thumbed a lift on the road. But I can tell you something." The man nodded at Bertie. "There's one of his pals here. I saw him hanging about on the edge of the wood. I couldn't get much out of him. I told him his mate was here with you. He said he was to meet him here. Hasn't he shown up yet?"

"No. We haven't got much out of this one, either," said Zolton, sulkily.

"It was his fault," growled the big man. "If he hadn't barged in Varley wouldn't have got away. What are we going to do?"

"There's no sense in hanging about here all day so we might as well forget it." responded Zolton. .

"Not me," spat the big man, named Corsini. "By the time I've finished with him his mother won't know him." As he spoke he took from his pocket, and put on his right hand, that brutal weapon called a knuckle-duster.

Ginger decided it was time he took a hand. He stepped into the clearing. "So here you are," he said cheerfully to Bertie. "I've been looking everywhere for you." He looked around. "What's going on here? Is there some sort of trouble?"

Bertie answered. "These unpleasant fellows want me to tell them what was in that kitbag we found — or something of the sort."

"Then why don't you tell 'em?" returned Ginger, casually.

Bertie looked at Ginger blankly. "Tell 'em? Why should I tell 'em anything?" He was obviously, and understandably, astonished by Ginger's suggestion.

“Well, if you won’t tell ‘em I will, if it’ll put an end to all this nonsense,” Ginger said. “There’s no secret about it, is there?” He looked at the others present and proceeded to carry out his mission as Biggles had ordered. “What is it you want to know?”

“We want to know what you know about this kitbag that was found here,” said Zolton. “How did you come to find it?”

“Oh that. We didn’t find it,” Ginger answered.

“Then who did?”

“Apparently some local naturalist who was pottering about here.”

“What did he do with it?” Zolton was now looking as if hearing the truth he couldn’t believe it.

“Well, I can only tell you what I’ve been told,” replied Ginger easily. “When he found it it was full of something, so, naturally, he opened the bag to see what it was.”

“What was in it?”

“You’ll never believe this,” declared Ginger. “It was mail. Registered mail, at that.”

“What did he do with it?”

“Told the police about it, of course.”

“Then what?”

“I gather they sent someone to collect it. A local copper.”

“What did they do with it?”

“Handed it over to the Post-Office for delivery.”

Zolton’s eyes narrowed. “How come you know all this?”

“Through the local police. You must have seen an officer here yesterday. He could have told you all about it, no doubt, had you asked him. He’s been looking around to see if there’s anything else here.”

“How do the local police think the bag got here?” “I wouldn’t know, but if you asked my opinion I’d say they haven’t got a clue. I imagine they’re still trying to work it out.”

Bertie’s expression at hearing this recital of the facts from Ginger can be imagined. The others in the party looked equally dumbfounded by this simple explanation of what to them must have been a mystery.

Said Zolton: “Do you happen to know what the Post-Office did with all this mail?”

“According to my information they delivered it,” replied Ginger. “After all, what else would you expect them to do with it?”

This was evidently as much as Zolton wanted to know. He rose from his portable seat, folded it and beckoned to his companions. "Let's get out of this," he said tersely.

Garsen did not move. "What about these two?" he asked, indicating Ginger and Bertie. "I've got a feeling they could be coppers. I can smell a copper a mile off."

"Oh, leave them alone," answered Zolton impatiently. "If they were anything to do with the police they wouldn't have said as much as they have."

"I'd make sure of 'em."

"We haven't time. I'm in a hurry. And for all we know that cop who was here yesterday might still be hanging about. I don't believe in taking unnecessary risks."

Garsen shrugged. "Okay. You're the boss."

The party moved off.

Ginger and Bertie watched them go. When they were out of earshot Bertie got up from his seat, saying: "Brother, was I glad to see you. Things were beginning to look awkward — if you see what I mean."

"I'd call that putting it mildly," returned Ginger with gentle sarcasm. "That was why I decided to take a hand."

"What was the idea of telling those scallywags as much as you did. Have you gone round the bend? Biggles'll have you shot when he hears about it."

"Forget it. It so happens those were his orders."

"How did that happen?"

"I saw him on the road. He rolled up when I was on the way to your car with the chap with the bandaged head. The gang was after him, he said. He was scared rigid. Which was no doubt why he was ready to talk. And he talked plenty. Told us all we wanted to know."

"And Biggles sent you back here?"

"That's right."

"To spill the beans about the kitbag?"

"Right again. Or that was one reason. The other was to see if you were okay."

Bertie shook his head. "I still don't get it. What was his idea that you should give this bunch of crooks the low-down on the mail."

"I don't know. He didn't tell me. But the whole thing has taken a new twist. Two gangs of drug racketeers are at war with each other.

There isn't time to tell you all about it now. I'll give you the gist of it as we go along."

"Go along where?"

"Lotton Hall, to find Minnie. Biggles said we were to call him off what he's doing and take him home."

"Fair enough, old boy. If those are his orders we'd better get on with it."

Chapter Twelve

Ginger and Bertie went swiftly along the side of the hedge as the nearest way to the main road. As they walked Ginger gave Bertie a crisp and concise account of what had happened during the morning.

Some distance away, through an occasional thin patch in the hedge they could see Zolton and his party taking a more direct route across the field to Lotton Hall.

“By Jove, old boy, you have been busy,” remarked Bertie.

“You haven’t done so badly yourself, if it comes to that,” replied Ginger. “What on earth were you doing up a tree?”

“Looking for a comfortable seat to take the weight off my feet, that’s all,” explained Bertie. “The bally thing wasn’t as secure as it looked, and, unfortunately, chose a nasty moment to let me down.”

“So I gathered from this chap Varley.”

“What do you suppose Biggles intends to do with him?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t much time for talking. He went off in a hurry. I can only imagine he wanted, first of all, to get the fellow clear of Lotton Hall to save him from being bumped off. Then, having got him to the Yard, perhaps get him to sign a statement that would give him the evidence he needs to bring a case against these crooks Zolton and Alfondari.”

“I wonder what Zolton will do now he knows the cat — or rather, the mail, is out of the bag.”

If he discovers that we’ve got Varley, who might be in the mood to rat on him, he might skip out of the country.”

“He’ll have to be smart to do that now Biggles has got the edge on him.”

They had now reached the road, and stopped to look both ways. If they had hoped to see Minnie they were to be disappointed. There was no one in sight.

“What had we better do?” queried Bertie. “I feel as if I’ve just pulled out of a spin and can’t see which way I’m going.”

“As we may have to move fast if we can get hold of Minnie I think our best plan would be to fetch your car and park it a bit nearer Zolton’s house. There’s a chance that Minnie may have gone to the car and is waiting there for us. If there’s no sign of him it means all we can do is go to look for him.”

“If we bump into Zolton or any of his thugs while we’re on their

property they'll realise we were not the jolly little babes in the wood who had lost their way, as we pretended to be — if you see what I mean," Bertie said. "I'm only surprised they didn't realise that sooner."

"They were too taken up with the lost mail to think about anything else," replied Ginger, turning to the right to reach Bertie's car. "Now, alter me giving them all the gen about the mail they can hardly suppose us to be plain clothes men from Scotland Yard."

Bertie chuckled. "Matter of fact, old boy, just before you rolled up I fancy Zolton was getting a bit suspicious. He asked me if we were anything to do with the police."

"What did you say to that?"

"I put on my best smile and asked him if I looked like a copper? That made the big tough guffaw as if it was a joke. He must have thought I didn't look much like a sleuth."

Ginger grinned broadly and chuckled.

"All right — all right, you needn't rub it in," protested Bertie. "My face may not line up with Sherlock Holmes but it has its advantages."

By this time they had reached Bertie's car, standing where it had been left. Getting in they drove back up the road towards where Minnie had been dropped off to reconnoitre round the Hall. Just before they reached the drive entrance a taxi came out and drove on towards London.

"I wonder who that was," murmured Ginger.

"It should mean some of the stinkers are out of the way," Bertie said.

"It might have been Zolton going to his phoney address to collect his precious drugs, now that he knows the stolen mail has been delivered."

"Do you know the address?"

"Yes. Varley told us. It's a little hotel in Bloomsbury."

"I could overtake him and get there first," suggested Bertie.

Ginger considered the proposal then shook his head. "I can't see any point in it. What could we do? We've no search warrant so we couldn't arrest him."

The matter was not pursued and Bertie brought the car to a halt by the roadside at the place for which they had been making. They got out and climbing the bank to the hedge looked over it for any sign

of Minnie. They did not seriously expect to see him, and in fact they didn't. Bertie suggested whistling, but Ginger disapproved on the grounds that it might attract the attention of people they would do better to avoid. So they walked on a little way looking for a gap in the hedge that would allow them to get into the grounds, the garden of flowering shrubs from which Minnie had proposed to start his reconnaissance. They had just succeeded in getting through when they were startled by the furious barking of dogs no great distance away.

"I'd forgotten the bally dogs Zolton was said to keep here," Bertie said.

"I don't like it," answered Ginger, looking worried. "They wouldn't kick up this row by seeing anyone they knew. The most likely person to have upset them would be Minnie. The only thing he could do against a pack of dogs would be to bolt."

"If he could. If I know anything about dogs I'd say they've got somebody cornered."

"If it's Minnie he must be in a tight spot," stated Ginger, looking alarmed. "I can't see how we could help him. We're not equipped to deal with a pack of hounds."

"Neither was Minnie," Bertie pointed out. "The dogs were always a risk. He knew that."

They could still not see what was causing the commotion but they could judge the direction from which it was coming. The dogs were now doing more growling than barking.

"They're over there by those stables, or whatever they are," Bertie said.

"Anyone in the house must have heard the row in which case they'll be out to see what all the fuss is about," declared Ginger.

They walked on a little way, slowly, hoping to see Minnie appear. When this failed Bertie said: "Well, what are we going to do about it? We can't just stand here doing nothing while Minnie may be torn to pieces by a lot of rampaging hounds."

Ginger agreed. "There's only one thing for it," he stated. "We shall have to find out what's going on. We should be able to get close enough to do that without being spotted by the dogs or anyone who comes out of the house."

"We can at least try it," affirmed Bertie.

They moved on, slowly, prepared to beat a quick retreat, towards

the nearest cover, a group of rhododendrons which up to now had impeded their view. Round this they worked their way, but were still unable to see the cause of the outcry. What they could see, however, was the upper part of a building which showed above more shrubs ahead.

“Not even a bally tree to climb if the dogs come for us,” remarked Bertie. “You can’t do much against dogs with your bare fists.”

“You needn’t tell me,” Ginger answered, dourly. “But what else can we do? Minnie can’t be far away. If the dogs are after him you’d think he’d be on his way back to the road, flat out.”

They went on round the next shrubbery until they could see clearly what was beyond it. And what they saw pulled them up short. The spectacle at which they stared did not exactly surprise them, but there was something curious about it. The dogs, which they could now see — there were five or six of them — of the Alsatian type, had barked themselves to silence. They sat on their haunches in a rough semi-circle all gazing in the same direction as if waiting for something. In front of them was a fair-sized building with wide double doors which suggested that before the days of motor cars it had been a coach house or stable. The doors were shut. Above the roof rose a small bell tower. Another feature that supported the theory that the place had once been a stable was a loft with an outside door for the admission of hay or some other fodder. The door, which overlooked an open courtyard, was wide open. A ladder reached to it from ground level.

It was the angle at which the dogs held their heads that gave Ginger a clue as to what their interest was. They were all looking up. Apparently at the door of the loft. Ginger also looked up at it.

And presently what he saw confirmed his suspicions. A man appeared to take a cautious look down at the dogs. The dogs saw him. They bristled, and as obviously they couldn’t climb the ladder they had to be content with growling.

Ginger clutched Bertie’s arm when he saw who was in the loft.

“There he is,” he breathed. Meaning, of course, Minnie.

“Got himself in a proper fix, by the look of it,” observed Bertie, adjusting his monocle.

“It’s easy to see what must have happened,” whispered Ginger.

“The dogs went for him. Having nowhere else to go he bolted up

the ladder. Now he daren't come down."

"I'd say that's the long and short of it," agreed Bertie. "Absolutely. Now the silly ass has got himself well and truly boxed in."

"You couldn't blame him for going up the ladder if the dogs were on his heels," protested Ginger.

"He shouldn't have gone so close to the house."

"What good could he have done if he hadn't?" Ginger pointed out. "One of his jobs was to see what cars there were here, and he couldn't have done that by sitting in the bushes. The dogs may not have been in sight when he went over to the stable, or whatever it was."

"True enough old boy, true enough," conceded Bertie. "I'm dashed if I can see what we can do about it. Can you? I mean to say, to go near those bow-wows would be asking for it."

This was so evident that Ginger did not answer. There would seem to be no answer to the problem. All he could do was to continue to stare at the door of the loft where Minnie sometimes looked down in a quick peep. He considered waving to attract his attention, to let him see they were there and had realised his predicament. But he decided it was too dangerous. If the dogs should see the movement, and turn their attention to them, having nowhere to retreat they would be in an even worse plight. Then, as he stood there contemplating the situation, out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a development that did nothing to improve matters. A man was coming from the direction of the house. Under his arm he carried a rifle or a sporting gun. At the distance it was not possible to say which.

"Great grief!" he breathed to Bertie. "Look who's here."

Bertie looked. "Stiffen the crows! It's that little rat who carries an automatic. He's now got some heavier artillery."

"He must have heard the dogs barking and has come to see what it's about," surmised Ginger.

"Sort of complicates things, as if they weren't bad enough already — if you follow me," murmured Bertie.

"It'll complicate things still more if he sees us," stated Ginger grimly. "He was still carrying his pocket pistol when he was chasing Varley. I imagine he's still got it on him. If he finds us here it'll take a bit of explaining. We'd better stand fast to see what he does. Naturally, the dogs know him, so they won't touch him. Some are

already going to meet him.”

“Good thing they can’t tell him what they’ve been shouting about.”

“He may guess,” returned Ginger moodily. “He’ll know there’s a stranger about. This just about sews things up as far as we’re concerned.”

“We shall have to do something.”

“Tell me what?” requested Ginger, bitterly.

“Well, I mean to say, we can’t just push off and leave Minnie in the lurch.”

“I wasn’t thinking of doing anything of the sort. There must be a way out of this mess if only we could think of it. I’ll tell you what,” Ginger went on quickly. “There’s only one thing for it. You bolt back to the car and try to get in touch with Biggles on the nearest phone. He’ll have got back to the Yard some time ago. Tell him we need help.”

“Leaving you here alone?”

“Yes. I’ll do what I can to delay things. If things come unstuck here there should be one witness to report what happened. Get cracking. There’s no time to lose. Once you get behind those bushes you’ll be out of sight.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Don’t argue.”

With considerable reluctance Bertie backed away from

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(Here the manuscript ends)

Appendix I – Captain W. E. Johns’ Notes

Although sadly the narrative of Biggles Does Some Homework breaks off in mid sentence, fortunately a few pages of notes were found with the uncompleted manuscript. Transcripts of them are included here, for they contain two versions of a continuation of chapter twelve, and further notes and jottings afford us an invaluable glimpse of Captain W. E. Johns at work.

CHAPTER 12 — DRAFT

While this brittle conversation had been going on things had been happening at the stable. Minnie had appeared in the open doorway.

He called: “I can’t do anything while those dogs are there. Call them off and I’ll come down.”

The man’s answer was to open one of the stable doors and order the dogs inside. This done he closed the door on them. Then he shouted: “All right. They can’t get at you now. Come on down.”

Minnie emerged, with a foot on the top rung of the ladder.

Ginger still did nothing although he realized he was taking a risk of seeing Minnie shot. But he did not think the man with the gun would commit cold-blooded murder on such a slender excuse as he had. It seemed more likely that curiosity would require him to know what Minnie was doing in the loft. Ginger’s main purpose now was to gain time to enable Bertie to get clear. Meanwhile Minnie was now nearly at the bottom of the ladder, and Ginger decided the time had come to intervene. Leaving the cover of the shrubs he strode openly towards the stable.

For a minute he remained unnoticed. Then Minnie was the first to see him. He shouted: “You’d better keep out of this.” As a result, the man spun round to see to whom the warning was addressed, and of course, he saw Ginger coming towards him.

“What the devil are you doing here,” he demanded, as Ginger came within speaking distance. It was perhaps a natural question.

“I’ve come to see what my friend’s doing here,” replied Ginger.

“What does he think he’s doing, anyhow?”

“Why not ask him? I imagine he scooted up the ladder to save himself from being savaged by that pack of mongrels you keep here.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Minnie.

“What are both of you doing here? This is private property.”

“So I believe,” returned Ginger coolly. “But it’s not likely to be private for much longer.”

“Oh, and why not?”

“The police should soon be on their way here. My other friend, the one who fell out of the tree, has gone to fetch them.”

This seemed to have the effect for which Ginger hoped. The man stared. Before he could recover Ginger went on: “I wish you’d put that gun down. You’re handling it too carelessly for my liking. That’s how accidents happen”

NO. DIFFERENT ENDING

The wheel of fortune now appeared to take a turn to Ginger’s advantage.

The man took a key from his pocket. He unlocked the stable door. He ordered the dogs inside. They obeyed sullenly. The man closed the door on them. Ginger noticed he left the key in the lock. He then, to Ginger’s surprise, rested the gun — a double-barrelled 12-bore — against the door and took his automatic from his pocket. The reason for this was not hard to see when he went on to the ladder and began to ascend. To climb a ladder carrying a sporting gun, which would completely occupy one hand, would be awkward, to say the least; if loaded, as presumably it was, it could also be dangerous.

Thinking as fast as he had ever thought in his life Ginger snatched at an opportunity it would have been too much to expect. He waited till man was halfway up ladder. Then, advancing swiftly on tiptoe to make as little noise as possible, he dashed to the stable door and snatched up the gun that had been left there. Noticing at a glance that it had been put on ‘safe’. With thumb switched off the safety catch.

Appendix II – What Happened Next?

How Captain W.E. Johns intended to complete the narrative of *Biggles Does Some Homework* will never be known, but it is a fascinating subject for conjecture. We feel sure that readers will make up their own endings to the story, but here is our attempt at an outline for the rest of the novel.

Our outline for the Continuation of the Story

Chapter 12 (Continued)

Ginger captures Joe's rifle, and the latter is disarmed and imprisoned in Minnie's former refuge. As Ginger knows, the taxi has been driven off and he guesses correctly that both Zolton and Corsini have departed, leaving Lotton Hall empty. Ginger and Minnie go inside to phone Biggles and search the building for evidence.

Biggles says that he has heard from Bertie, and the police are on the way. He has told Bertie to return to Lotton Hall in case he is needed, and when he arrives Ginger should wait there to assist the police. Minnie and Bertie should go in Bertie's Jaguar to Sparham airfield to try to make contact with Algy. The latter had been assigned the task of finding out if a plane landed at an airfield in the vicinity of Lotton Hall on the night of the mail robbery. On Biggles' return to the Yard, he found that Algy had phoned from Sparham to say that he is on to something, but he has not been heard of since.

Chapter 13

At this stage, everything seems nearly over bar the shouting — Ginger, Bertie and Minnie must guess by now, and the reader has long ago guessed, that Biggles expects Zolton or one of his gang to turn up at the Marquis to collect the heroin, where he will be arrested red-handed. But no! This is the quiet before the storm, because Biggles begins to feel uneasy and does some homework. Ginger and Minnie have told him that Zolton and Corsini have left Lotton Hall

in the taxi, but this does not mean that they will both go to the Marquis. Why should Zolton take the risk himself, when he can send Corsini on his own? The bait may have been too obvious, and Zolton may suspect a trap. Biggles feels he will have failed if Corsini is arrested but Zolton gets away. The airman finds out from Varley where the cottage in the New Forest is situated, because he suspects that Zolton's supplies of drugs are brought there by air, and that Zolton will bolt there and escape on a supply plane if the game is up.

Deciding to act on a hunch, Biggles puts Varley into protective custody, and instead of accompanying Inspector Gaskin and his men to the Marquis, the airman pilots an Air Police plane to Sparham. Has Zolton decided to fly from there to his hideout in the New Forest, and what has happened to Algy?

Chapter 14

“What happened to Algy” is now revealed. It takes him some time to find the airfield where Varley landed, and he feels considerable satisfaction when he discovers the pilot’s plane at Sparham airfield. Although he is unaware of Varley’s revelations (which have actually made his assignment unnecessary) and has never met Zolton, Algy knows that the owner of Lotton Hall must be involved in the affair, and when the gang leader arrives at Sparham in his taxi, the airman puts two and two together. Biggles’ hunch is correct, for while the unsuspecting Corsini drives away in the taxi, bound for the Marquis,

Zolton hires a plane to take him to the New Forest. He also engages a pilot — Algy! There is nowhere to land next to the cottage (Varley was ordered to drop the kitbag on open ground there, not to land with it, and the bag was used because it was white and would show up), but Zolton guides Algy to a large, secluded meadow half a mile away. Here a Land Rover awaits them, driven by another of Zolton’s men, and they are taken by a winding track to the cottage. The pretence is maintained that Algy is a free agent, and he is requested to remain in case Zolton wishes to be flown back to Sparham later on. Algy knows he is on very thin ice, but he still succeeds in spying on Zolton, and acquires invaluable information and evidence about his gang and the international organisation that supplies him with drugs. However, Zolton has given Corsini a deadline for telephoning him if all has gone well, and when the time limit is up, Algy is seized and knocked unconscious.

Chapter 15

Ginger, awaiting the police at Lotton Hall, witnesses the arrival of the Alfondari gang, bent on destroying their rivals. He manages to hide but Joe is discovered and only saves his life by revealing the existence and location of the cottage and the landing-ground in the New Forest. Taking Joe with them, the gang (eight in number) race off recklessly in their two Mercedes, hotly pursued by Ginger, who goes alone, in Varley’s Cortina.

Chapter 16

At Sparham, Biggles learns that his hunch is right. Fortunately, as Varley told him he could not land at the cottage, he has already checked for airfields in the surrounding area, while still at the Yard.

As luck would have it, his old friend, Sir Lorrington King, once known as Gimlet, owns the estate on which the cottage stands, and has his own air-strip. Biggles pauses only to leave orders and directions for Bertie and Minnie to follow him, and flies from Sparham to Gimlet's grounds. He had intended to see if his friend was in residence on his arrival, but as soon as he lands his plane, he is out of it and running wildly for the cottage in the distance, for it is a mass of flame! At first he thinks it is deserted but then he sees a figure waving from a window. He tears inside, finds a locked door, shoots it open and rescues — Algy! The latter tells Biggles that Zolton knows that Corsini has been arrested, and has set off with his followers for his secret landing ground. The supply plane is almost due, so how can they stop Zolton now?

Chapter 17

As Biggles and Algy stand outside the blazing cottage, a sound from the past fills the air, and a Tiger Moth flies overhead. Before they can even comment on this, however, the Alfondari gang arrives. To the airmen's relief they sweep past in their two cars, and disappear up the track. Then Ginger arrives in the Cortina, Biggles and Algy dash forward, Ginger hardly stops as he opens the door, and the three airmen are off again in pursuit of the gangsters.

Chapter 18

The Tiger Moth, with Bertie at the control, makes a perfect landing on Gimlet's air-strip. He and Minnie have arrived in the only transport still available at Sparham. Copper, one of Gimlet's commandos in the old days, now appears — his master is away, but he is delighted to come to the support of his old friends. But how are the three men to reach the secret airfield in time to be of use? They have no vehicle at their disposal. Minnie saves the day by leading the way along a quick, cross-country route, following a trail invisible to the others. "Will this mad chase ever end?" Minnie wonders, but soon he and his companions arrive at the secret landing-ground, where a large plane is now standing. A pitched battle is taking place between the Alfondari gang on the one hand and Zolton and the crew of the plane on the other. The Air Police are on the edge of the mêlée,

and to their chagrin Zolton and his gang gain the upper hand, and the plane takes off.

Chapter 19

Minnie streaks for the plane previously flown by Algy, and is swiftly airborne. The Air Police now overpower the surviving members of the Alfondari gang, and watch their new recruit's progress with bated breath. As Minnie says later, all he hoped to do was to follow the supply plane, but suddenly Zolton's pilot begins firing at the young man's unarmed machine. Minnie takes brilliant evasive action; both planes are flying low, and the gangster pilot loses his nerve and flies into a pylon. Minnie is a hero, and the Air Police have not only eliminated two gangs and their suppliers, but have irrefutable evidence which ultimately leads to the rounding up of an international drug-smuggling organisation.

Chapter 20

The loose ends are tied up. Zolton and all those on the plane with him, died in the crash; Varley continues to assist the police, and gets off lightly; Corsini, (alias Garsen) who murdered the driver of the mail van, Joe and the members of the Alfondari gang, who were arrested on the airfield, are all sentenced to their just deserts.

The last scene takes place in the Air Police office at Scotland Yard. The Air Commodore is present, Minnie is confirmed as a member of the Section, and there are congratulations all round.

Appendix III – How It All Ended

(The final pages of the story as imagined by Piers Williams)

“Your great-great-grandfather did a good day’s work when he became a squaw man,” asserted Ginger.

“And so say all of us,” agreed Bertie heartily. “By the by, old boy,” he went on, turning to the last speaker, “I hear you nearly popped the question once, don’t you know? Ravishin’ island maiden saved your life, moonlight under the palm-trees, and all that.”

Ginger laughed. “Who’s been telling tales out of school? There was no romance, but I would have gone for a Burton all right if it hadn’t been for Full Moon, a wonderful girl I met in the South Seas.”

Minnie came in. “Why didn’t you fall for her?”

“I was only a kid at the time, and she had a boyfriend already, Shell-breaker. They married and I still keep up with them. I stayed with them on my holiday last year.”

“Their youngest son’s in this country now, isn’t he?” put in Biggles.

“That’s right he’s learning to fly.”

“Is he by James!” Biggles looked at the Air Commodore with a twinkle in his eye. “What about another recruit for the Air Police? A lad from the isles would bring in more new skills, and the more the merrier as far as I’m concerned.”

“Any protégé of yours would be welcome,” said Raymond seriously, “but there are no vacancies at the moment.”

“You seem to forget that I’m due to retire soon. I’ve got my eye on a little cottage in Hertford.”

“Where Marie Janis lives now,” murmured Bertie, “not to mention dear Erich close by.”

Algy shrugged his shoulders at the mention of Von Stalhein, the airmen’s former arch-enemy, but Minnie was only interested Marie. “Who’s she?” he breathed in wonderment.

“Biggles’ old flame, by Jove!”

Minnie’s eyes saucered.

Biggles continued to address Raymond. “As Algy and I are contemporaries, he’s decided to leave the Air Police when I do. We’ve talked it over, and we’d like — ”

“Not so fast!” his chief interrupted him. “Why this sudden urge to be grounded?”

Biggles raised his brows. "But it was your idea, sir! You said the time was near for me to let go of the joystick. I'd rather choose my own time and quit the cockpit now than be forced to bail out."

"The time for you to go may be approaching — but it's not come yet," declared the Air Commodore roundly. "Retire when you like, by all means Bigglesworth, but not straight away — especially after your latest success. You've plenty of flying hours left to you yet, and that goes for Lacey too."

A slow smile spread over Biggles' face. "Well if you put it like that, sir — " he glanced at Algy. "How do you feel about staying on, partner?"

"Suits me," responded the latter, with a grin.

"Then the Air Police will remain as the old team." Biggles looked round at a ring of beaming faces. "With one new addition, of course. Minnie has passed his probationary period with flying colours. We'll press on in our nice new machines, and for an insignia what could be better than Minnie's family crest — a tomahawk!"